Christian hope is an Advent theme and it is predicated on a doctrine which was forged in one of the bleakest parts of the Christian story - the time after Jesus, the first generation of the church. Christians were being persecuted intensely. They were powerless in the face of the Roman authorities. They were nothing but a nuisance the empire had decided to eliminate. And so when they gathered to contemplate their own grimly apocalyptic future, they recalled the ancient Jewish promise of the Day of the Lord, the restoration of the Davidic monarchy when the king would return. And they recalled the words of Jesus about the kingdom of God coming in the world: and they articulated a doctrine about the second coming of Christ on the clouds which shortly became a problem for them and which has confused Christian people ever since.

When interpreted literally the image of the second coming they left for us has stimulated countless folk to sell all their belongings and stand around waiting for the end of the world. They were doing it in Thessalonica and some folks are still doing it. The fact that the end didn't come - didn't come as even Jesus said it would, caused the writer of the fourth Gospel, for instance, to suggest that Jesus Christ has already come again: that there is a second coming whenever God's spirit is at work in the human enterprise.

Now because of the excesses of the literalists who are waiting for the end of the world, we don't pay much attention to the doctrine. And that's too bad because it is where the hope in Christianity is located: not that Jesus is going to descend on clouds and gather all the folk who belong to the right church and consign the rest of us to hell, but that Jesus Christ will keep showing up - will not abandon human history - but will keep appearing as a hopeful, redemptive possibility: an energy, if you will, an impetus in the direction opposite from the way things are going, the direction of healing, and reconciliation and hope.

What it means today is important; namely that we can count on a redemptive possibility in even the darkest valleys. Sometimes we may not like the form it takes. Sometimes we may not recognize it. We may deplore the methods of the protestors - but they raise the issue of life and hope for us. We can't expect God to intervene to save the human race, but we can look for God in the frustrations and impatience and deep love of good people who are saying to one another now, "let's get together and talk about this" instead of quaking in terror, people who gathered in churches and townhalls and schools last Monday to share their deep concern for their country and the whole human race.

God will break in, Christ will come again and it will be personal. One of my favorite writers Frederick Buechner said in an interview recently, "Listen to what's happening in your own life...to experiences that somehow, even if you can't say how - seem either to illumine, or to be illumined by, religious truth. Pay special attention to those times when you find tears in your eyes, even if you don't know why the tears are there. Listen to your life." (Christian Century, 11/83)

Text - be wakeful

I suppose the most common, nearly universal response to Advent is a kind of surprise. This year is no exception: "Don't tell me it's here already! Why it was just Labor Day." We're not ready and that's just the point. We never are. and one of the reasons is that the very event which documents our hope in history - the birth of Jesus - has become such a warmly sentimental holiday: all nostalgia and focusing on the past. The thrust you see, is meant to be the future.

Sometimes bread is more than bread. Thus, the traditional Jewish prayer, even more ancient than the Celtic: "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the world, who bringest forth bread from the earth."

Sometimes bread is more than bread. Sometimes, most times, it is quintessentially the food we need to live. Let me tell you more about bread than you probably wished to know. It's production has consumed most of the attention of most of the people who ever lived. Bread represents civilization. Wandering, nomadic people don't eat much bread. Manna in the wilderness is a great, life-giving miracle, because you don't have the capacity to produce bread if you're on the road the better part of forty years. Anthropologically speaking, the manna the children of Israel ate in the wilderness was a lab exercise in the kind of life they could lead in the promised land if they promised to settle down and plow some fields instead of wandering around the desert, living in tents. Bread means civilization.

There were bakers in wealthy households in the ancient world and they were good at their art: they experimented with ingredients, baking methods, shapes and sizes. But for the vast majority of households in the ancient world, baking bread was what you did, most of the day, every day, day in and day out, as long as you lived.

The dough was made from wheat flour and water, supplemented by whatever other cereal meal was available. In Canaan the people learned to crumble and knead a piece of yesterday's bread to provide leavening. Baking could be as simple as a heated rock and the flat round cake covered with hot ashes, or as sophisticated as a kind of convection oven made of an inverted earthen jar. The loaf was ordinarily an 18 inch disk, like a small pizza. Three per day - was the basic diet. One of its major functions, from the beginning, was to convey other food into the mouth, an edible utensil, a practice we have all seen our youngsters try on occasion.

Even in antiquity bread is celebrated for its power as a symbol. The Old Testament employs a variety of images - the bread of idleness, bread of deceit, bread of tears, breads of adversity. And then, one time, one of them drew all of that meaning together and gave the world something it has never yet been able to stop pondering. Jesus said: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger."

He had fed a large crowd of people with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. The next day part of that same crowd had followed him. They became uncomfortable when he wondered out loud about their motives. For their part, they revealed those motives clearly and impatiently by saying: "What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness. He gave them bread from heaven." Translate that: "How about some more of that bread, Jesus?" And he said, "...the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." And they said, "Lord, give us this bread always." and he said, "I am the bread of life."

It is not accurate to conclude from this that Jesus didn't care about bread which is bread. After all, he had provided a substantial meal the day before. And I believe, only someone who knows about and loves the look and smell and touch and feel and taste of good bread, has the ability to use it as a metaphor for something else. My guess is that the one who called himself the bread of life, knew and loved and was something of an expert on that less august bread which fills the air with its bouquet, and the sight of which is an insistent reminder fo the needs of the flesh which, on measure, are among the creator's better ideas.

A faith that is powerfully life-giving and life-affirming is expressed not so much in acts of private piety but in personal acts of courage when we take a stand for life: when for instance our political and economic positions are corrected by our faith and not vice versa and we take a strong stand, get involved, give of ourselves. The PBS special "Chemical People" was essentially asking concerned folks to love and affirm life enough to get invovled in combatting the epidemic the deadly epidemic - of alcohol and drug abuse among the young. To take a stand for life in your community might mean doing that, getting involved in one of the many follow-up ventures here in Franklin County. Or it might mean asking elementary questions about how poor people are fed and housed in our community; and affirming life by working for justice and fairness and compassion. To make a faith commitment - on the side of life in our city might mean learning about the facts - not the stereotypes - but the truth about the system of public welfare and food stamps and utility bills, and how many people will be without heat this winter; or about health care and the plight of the elderly poor.

And it might mean looking clearly and carefully at our own lives and focussing on the opportunities each of us has every day, even within the context of our relationships with spouses, children, friends, colleagues, to "move out of death to life by loving..." That is the highest order of business for the church: to be the place where God's love in Jesus Christ is so fully experienced and expressed between people that they know, now and then, what it means to move from death to life.

It is not simple and it certainly is not easy. As a matter of fact love is very risky business. C. S. Lewis said that beautifully in a paragraph I'm tempted to read at every marriage: "Love anything," he wrote, "and your heart may be broken..." But the alternative, namely to risk nothing by loving sounds strikingly like death in the midst of life.

Robert Redford interviewed recently about his non-profit Film Lab in the mountains of Utah, where he spends most of his time, said: "Do you know what I learned from Utah, from living my life as I have? That you only keep things if you're willing to take risks - that you should make the best use you can of places and time, because with a certain success, a certain refinement in your life, you lose the very thing you started with, or you think you stand to lose it because the stakes are so high...so you try nothing new." (New York Times Magazine, 10/1/83)

From the beginning the appeal of stoicism has been enormous. "Risk nothing, lose nothing: love nothing, suffer nothing." And from the beginning it has been confronted by its diametric opposite - a Gospel about a God who loves so much that he gives an only son - who lays down his life in love. In philosophic terms and in the most personal, life centered terms, the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to acknowledge how much we are loved: to love life thoroughly because God loves it and to decide, to be; to move out of death into life by loving the people God gives us to love.

In a way that is what we intend to express in these financial pledges we make to our church. That is Stewardship at its best; not fund raising, but a deliberate decision to live by loving. We are trying, in many ways, to be a religious community which takes the imperative to love very seriously. It is not without risks - as we discover when someone steals our equipment; and it is not without inconvenience.

Most of us did not and will not, thank God, have to decide at 32 how to live the last eighteen months of our lives. And the depressed valleys most of us traverse on occasion, are relatively short. Yet both examples - Tom Dooley's life and Frost's haunting poem - suggest that each of us must choose to live: that human life, in all its magnificance, is more complex than the biological systems simply handed to us by our progenitors; that at the heart of it is a profound and elemental affirmation to live. Each of us is called by the giver of life to accept the gift, to embrace the gift, to celebrate and affirm it: to be who we are with high intentionality; with a bravery Paul Tillich eloquently described as "The Courage to Be."

To make that affirmation - to sieze life as it were - is to move from death to life; from the biological process of deterioration which begins, essentially, at our birth, to a glorious process of living life fully. It is perhaps the elemental human task.

Through history the function of religion and philosophy has been to help people find the path from death to life. Essentially the human race has chosen four ways to get there: knowledge, artistic beauty, religious mysticism and finally materialism. Death is negated and human life celebrated in the high intellectual expectations of Athens, the romantic art of the Renaissance, the devout piety of the monastery or in materialism - an alternative as old as the hedonist's invitation to "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

Of the four, our culture returns most consistently to materialism. The consumer philosophy is not only a part of the market economy we are counting on to save us, it is also a theology - a way of trying to beat back the forces of death and affirm life. And at first blush it seems like a good alternative. What better way to affirm life than to indulge my desires, to gratify my needs, to take my wants seriously?

The trouble is that it doesn't work. In fact, the poets, philosophers and theologians suggest that as a methodology materialism actually ends up denying life. T. S. Eliot once said that an apt epitaph for our civilization might be:

"Here were decent godless people
Their only monument the asphalt road
And a thousand lost golf balls."

Philosopher Sam Keen describes the "official version of the Good Life" with precision. "Happiness is a new car and a color TV. Security is a perimeter of ICBM's suurounding all 'hostile nations;' a large insurance policy, knowing your under-arm deodorant will keep you spring-fresh throughout the day, being well liked, having a good job....We begin to structure our time and energy to achieve what we 'desire:' we take jobs, make compromises, and settle down for a long wait, for the arrival that will bring the reward of happiness we so justly deserve..." (The Pastionate Life, p. 102)

The logical way to affirm one's own life is to get into one's self - or so it would seem. The trouble is, it doesn't work. The more self centered we become, the less we live. Dorothy Soelle has written a provocative book with the title "Death by Bread Alone" in which she describes in personal, behavioral terms what that deadly self centeredness looks and feels like. "Being alone and then wanting to be alone; being friendless, yet distrusting and despising others; forgetting and then

In the Soviet Union, at the other end of the political spectrum, the cost is identically precious. A recent New York Times Magazine feature on life in Russia contained a fascinating description of Christianity and the church in Soviet society. Official Marxist policy, of course, is that religion will wither away if left alone. And so churches are open. Since 1936, however, it has been illegal to teach, hold classes or discussion groups, or proselytize in any way. And when, in spite of official atheism, the church continues to appeal to people and attract interest, the state begins to exact a dear price indeed..."To lure the young away from midnight Easter services, state movie houses run American films that can never be seen at any other time; the only showings are at midnight. and for good measure...plain clothesmen circle the churches letting through the old and screening out the young. Names are taken and there are repercussions at schools and places of employment for those young people caught trying to enter." (10/16/83, "Russia, A People without Heroes," David K. Shipler, p. 38)

In terms reminiscent of our texts today, the article tells how, in rural areas particularly, the state removes children from Christian parents' custody, under the guise of protecting the health and welfare of minors.

One story, in particular, describes the cost of faithfulness. Father Dimitri Duko was a popular Orthodox preacher in Moscow in the early 70's. When the crowds of people in his church became embarrassingly large he was removed from his parish and reassigned to a remote congregation, where he continued to enjoy great success. In an interview at the time he said: "...the church in our country will always exist - because our country has the righest soil for Christianity. Here are suffering and persecution. It is not those wallowing in luxury who clutch at a straw."

Two years later he was arrested. Five months after his arrest, he appeared on Russian television to read his confession and apology, "I have seen that I have yielded to those propaganda voices that are directed at undermining our system. I repudiate what I have done..." (p. 90)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred saint of modern Christendom, was executed by the Nazis a few days before the end of the Second World War. Bonhoeffer saw, with the clarity of a saint, that the greatest temptation of the modern church existing in a free society - is something he called cheap grace. He described it in words that are now familiar, "...forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, communion with confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." (The Cost of Discipleship, p. 36)

Bonhoeffer saw clearly that the call of Jesus Christ is to nothing less than total commitment. And that the loss - the tragedy - for anything less than that, is not the church's but the individual's. Bonhoeffer saw that the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes an innocuous ritual for all those who cannot abide its serious call to obedience. "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die," he wrote. (p. 79)

It has been not [illegible] [illegible]

We cheat only ourselves when we cast the Christian faith in softer terms. And we miss the point entirely if we think that all God demands of us is a nod of the head and a few dollars a week.

see P3 - We become fully human in our choices -

And, as usual, in telling the story, the Bible catches us red-handed...pinning what can become an obsession with personal immortality on business success, academic reputation, fiscal security, military power - or even - the fine quality of children we have conceived, born and given to the world.

Abraham and we - need a reminder on occasion: namely that there is one eternal God - the fundamental monotheism of our faith, and that to hang our theological hopes on anything else is the fundamental human sin.

"Come now, preacher! We don't do that, really!" Theologian Langdon Gilkey suggests that when religious hope is gone, everything we do is designed to provide what religion used to provide - namely our salvation. Gilkey suggests, only partly with tongue in cheek, that the internal bickering, back-biting, an angling for position in any corporation or university faculty - is, in actually, a struggle for immortality.

Haven't you ever wondered about the intensity with which some parents urge on their children - on the athletic field or classroom, as if what happens or doesn't happen there is of eternal significance? Or, felt its pull in yourself?

Before you discard the Genesis incident as a barbaric relic and Abraham as a potential child abuser, allow the nuances of this story to raise the issue, at least, of the idols to which we happily sacrifice our children. The sculpture commemorating what happened a decade ago at Kent State is almost too powerful for us. It reminds us that there are idols and altars upon which we agree to sacrifice our young: the idol of ideology, the idol of success, the idol of appropriate behavior or dress and hair style - the defiance of which sometimes causes parents to turn on their own children: or the god of drugs and alcohol. Twenty teenagers will die today - because we are not honest enough to confront our cultural addiction to chemicals. Part of our idolatry is our unwillingness to confront the facts about ourselves. The cost is simply the sacrifice of the lives of children. When we allow the text to raise the tough issues, Abraham doesn't look so bad after all.

LCA Bias

It is an intensely personal story. Abraham had to stand before God totally alone, and put the priorities on his life in order. I believe this is what the story is about, finally; not that God wants people to sacrifice their children to prove a point, but that God's love for us is so intensely personal that we must ultimately confront him alone, as individuals. We are in relationship: we believe what we believe as a community. But ultimately before God we must be who we are, ourselves, singly, alone.

God provides an appropriate substitute sacrifice on this ancient story. Abraham stood alone and trusted and was given his son, his life, his future, back again. And they came down from the mountain - father and son - seemingly no different than when they went up, yet nothing would ever be the same.

Centuries later, a descendant of Abraham and Isaac, was on his way to his lonely destiny. Jesus, on the road to Jerusalem, was teaching a necessary lesson about the cost of faithfulness. Once again the subject of the dearest human relationships emerged. "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

That's what scared people about Jesus. That's what made Luther a threat to Rome. Both cared more about the vital creativity of God's living word than the forms and traditions of the moment. And that is why Christianity always has the potential to disturb and agitate and turn upside down that which is traditional. Christianity is, in essence, suspicious of its own forms. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is always a little suspicious of institutional religion.

Both Jesus and Luther desacralized religious tradition by claiming the sole sovereignty and holiness of God. God is sacred - not Catholic tradition, or Lutheran tradition or, for that matter, Broad Street Presbyterian tradition. Luther, our friend Walter Bouman, at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, likes to remind us, was not a Lutheran, didn't want a church named after him and assumed that the church was and always would be one. Calvin was not much of a Calvinist and Jesus of Nazareth, we must always remember, never heard the word Christian, but lived and died as a devout Jew.

Certainly part of continuing the spirit of Luther's reformation today is to acknowledge the finiteness of all religious tradition, regardless of how precious it is and how much we love it. The Ecumenical Movement expresses the essential oneness of a living church which transcends any and all the particular forms it now happens to take. Pope John Paul II said recently that he prays daily for wisdom in healing the 500 year old fracture of the church and, Pelikan notes wryly, that Rome regards Luther today not as a "wild boar in the Lord's Vineyard" but as something of a distinguished alumnus.

Certainly Brother Martin's reformation needs now to deal with the unprecedented explosion of Christian faith in the Southern Hemisphere in Third World nations. Very soon, most of the world's Christians will be living south of the Equator, in Africa and South America. And surely the continuation of Luther's reforming ways will lead us middle class Americans to handle our own traditions with love and eclipse. We Presbyterians now cheer when our rate of numerical decline is not as great as last year's. We Presbyterians - who provided the political theology for revolution and an institutional model for the Federal system of government - can't ever make it into the religion section of Time Magazine anymore. And we must learn to deal with that: to be as lean as God wants us to be.

We live in a dangerous world. Young Americans died last week - far from home, on two continents - in complex, ambiguous political circumstances. Clearly, whatever else it means, the world needs leaders with the courage to think new thoughts, the courage to discard the traditions of the past and find new forms - in the Near East, in Central America - which have the possibility of peace with justice. We are living at the edge of an age which promises vast and profound change: an almost scriptural age, full of apocalyptic danger and great promise. More than a century ago James Russell Lowell wrote a poem which seems to fit as never before:

"New occasions teach new duties. Time makes ancient good uncouth.
They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of truth."

A special committee of church members met for six months recently to look at our mission and published an excellent report which evaluates our work in eight different categories. The conclusion is eloquent and provocative and consistent with Luther and Jesus. It reads: "We have concluded that the church is most alive and well when it has goals to which it is pointing and for which it is willing to be challenged. We have documented the ways in which the people of Broad Street Presbyterian Church have responded with faith, hope, love, and support...to accom-

Luther was summoned to appear before Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of Spain, at the Diet of Worms. It was there, under orders to recant, that he said: "I am bound in conscience, held captive by the word of God...I neither can nor will recant anything, for it's neither right nor safe to act against conscience. Here I stand. God help me. Amen." The Diet of Worms declared Luther an outlaw and heretic and placed a sentence of death on his head. Friends spirited him away to the castle fortress of Wartburg where, in hiding, he translated the Bible into German. Historians credit Luther with major impact in the emergence of the German nation - by giving it its language in this project. He also wrote hymns, one of which, based on Psalm 46, conjures up images of the Mighty Fortress of Wartburg in which he was hiding.

In 1525, when it was safe to return to Wittenberg and his post at the University, Luther married Katherine von Bora, a former nun who with eight other companions had left their convent and fled to Saxony. Luther, who was so earthy much of his table talk is unsuitable for public discourse today, later referred to the "wagon of vestal virgins" which descended upon him. Luther and his "Katie" had six children. They lived in a forty room former cloister and their home was full of people constantly: students, theologians, other reformers, many friends. He wrote a major tract, or article, or book, every two weeks the rest of his life. He preached regularly, beligerently with great strength. He died at the age of 63, in the village of his birth, having a few days before said, "God willing that I return to Wittenberg, I shall eat and drink heartily so the worms will have a good fat doctor of theology on which to feed."

Nothing would be more inconsistent with his own life than to romanticize this strong figure of history. Luther was a man of his day, a day very different from our own. Yale theologian Jaroslav Pelikan writing in the New York Times Magazine earlier this fall, notes: "Martin Luther had beliefs about devils and witches ...He could be stubborn and cantakerous and something of a bully." While at first condemning the exploitation of German Christians by Roman church officials, Luther later reversed his field and sided with the princes in a German peasant's revolt, advising the princes to slaughter as many as possible. He affirmed Jesus' Jewishness but late in life became virulently anti-semitic a tragic fact which another German movement, Naziism, happily exploited. He maintained the sanctity of conscience and his own right to civil disobedience but later advised obedience to the state under all circumstances in a way that historians sometimes claim assisted the rise of Fascism in Germany.

He was far from perfect. But his contributions to the church - and to the world - were enormous. Lord Acton, a 19th Century, British Catholic historian, said that Luther's courageous stand at the Diet of Worms was "the most pregnant and momentous fact of our history." Freedom of conscience, human liberty, the sanctity of the individual was being born. We Presbyterians are inclined to conclude that it took John Calvin to think it through thoroughly and institutionalize it. But, obviously, here, in the experience of Luther, this radically creative idea, emerged for one of the first and most important times.

Luther departed from a 1000 year tradition by suggesting that all Christians have a vocation - not just clergy, a calling to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. He got Christians reading the Bible in their own language, singing in church and, among his greatest contributions was the restoration of marriage and human sexuality to its rightful and Biblical perspective as a gift of God to be enjoyed. Luther and Katherine married to express a point - namely that the traditional celibacy of the church was no more holy than marriage and then fell wonderfully and physically in love. Professor Pelikan thinks that one of Luther's and Katie's greatest and

God insists on the struggle. It is a haunting thought! In one of Frederick Nietzchi's novels a character is talking about why God must die. "God looks with eyes that see everything. He peers into man's ground and depth, into his hidden shame and ugliness." And Paul Tillich wrote: "He is God only because he is inescapable."

The Jabbok, by the way, is not on the map. The stream - the place - is insignificant. So our Jabboks, the places where God catches up with us, will be remote, obscure: perhaps not sitting in church at all, but alone, at night, trying to sleep. Dorothee Soelle, in her book Death By Bread Alone, tells about trying to live through a period of deep personal darkness. She writes, "I had reached the end of the line and God had scrapped the first draft of the design for my life. He had not comforted me as a psychologist would. He had not offered me any of the placebos society usually prescribes...He knocked me to the ground. Gradually it began to dawn on me that people who believe, limp somewhat, as Jacob limped after wrestling with God." (p. 32)

It is God Jacob is wrestling and so we can expect the story to be repeated for us. "Why are we all limping?" J. Barrie Shepherd asks in a poem based on this story:

Can it be this love of God
must wound us so that it can heal us?
Might this halting hip of Jacob signify
that when we do contend with love, when we
grapple with and finally are transformed by
the power of God's grace we become
more vulnerable, not less:
more likely to get hurt than
those who chose always to play it safe..."

If we have lived life, we all limp a little finally. We may not be guilty of Jacob's crassness and avarice, but if we have lived we know a bit about moral compromise and expediency. We all limp home finally with the bright dreams of youth a little faded, with our banners a bit soiled and torn: with failures as well as successes, in our satchel with our weaknesses as well as our strengths clearly revealed.

If we have lived life and if, along the way, we have been accosted by God we will limp a bit. But along the way we will have come to understand that the limp is a gift - a mark of something wonderful. We will have known that God loves and accepts us in spite of our failures: that God loves our humanness more than we have ever been able to love it: that God gives us what we can never earn - namely his grace and love and presence.

The one who learned it first was a distant relative to another who affirmed our humanity by taking it upon himself: Jacob - distant relative of Jesus - who lived our life and died our death and showed us God's great love for us and in whose humanity you and I are given back our own humanity.

The story doesn't end - as all good stories never end. Jacob held on till morning and then, in the light of a new day, limped across the Jabbok into the promised land to live the rest of his life as God's chosen; the same Jacob, but with a new name now and a limp to remind him of that strange night long ago and the incredible thought which I imagine never left him until the day he died - the idea of God, a God who loves and cares and accosts and forces us to wrestle through the night. Amen.

It was a large caravan heading for Canaan: servants, guides, herdsmen, trunks, bales, wagons, sheep and cattle, wives and children. It has all the marks of a very triumphant entry: a victorious homecoming for an enormously successful prodigal son. Two thoughts, however, dull the shine on this potentially auspicious occasion. One of them is the thought of Esau, who for all Jacob knows is harboring a 20-year grudge and rather relishing the thought of a meeting to settle the score. Esau is still there. The other thought is Jahweh - God - a thought so awesome and relentless and holy - that it never gets expressed verbally. But Jahweh has been there and is there, showing up at curious times, in that peculiar dream about a ladder to heaven, and in sleepless, night-time reveries about a promise and a covenant and a mighty nation. Jacob can't shake the thought that he has a job to do: that he is chosen by the creator to do something, at least to be something - other than the crook that he is.

And so I have always imagined a mixture of motives as they approach the border, and Jacob, a bit ostentatiously, stands down and watches them all cross the small stream called Jabbok and at the very last minute decides to remain behind alone. During the night we are not told what he does: prays, thinks, remembers, regrets - makes resolutions, plans - ? And at some point he is accosted, attacked and for hours wrestles with a strange opponent. When the sun rises in the East, Jacob has a new name - Israel - "the one who contends with God" - and a limp.

Given similar circumstances, the night before our life takes a dramatic turn, we would pray for strength. A swift chariot and strong shield might be more appropriate for the occasion. Jacob needs to be "equipped for ministry" to use current ecclesiastical jargon, and we would at least turn to the page in the Worshipbook marked ordination and pray God to give him intelligence, imagination, and love. On the far side of the Jabboks of my life I've prayed for a variety of gifts. What Jacob got, however was a limp.

God's chosen, that is to say, gets a lesson in human frailty, human limits, human mortality. That, this extraordinary story says, at the outset is worth having. Let Jacob's new limp then stand for his humanness, his vincibility, and write yourself into this story by thinking for a moment about how important, and how difficult, it is to deal with your humanness.

The theologians suggest that it is a lesson we would prefer not to learn. In fact, we spend a lot of time avoiding it, denying our mortality, unwilling to affirm our limits. We seem intent on establishing something immortal, something absolute. At the most basic level most of us have serious trouble acknowledging the limitations of our own intelligence, our own opinions, our political preferences, our social attitudes. At the most basic level we have trouble seeing that what we perceive is only a part, a very relative part - at that, of the whole truth. Most of the evils visited on one part of the human race by another part of the human race were the result of this relentless absolutizing. Naziism, Communism both posture as the final, absolute solution and because of that confidence, feel called to coerce the rest of humanity to share their assumptions and adopt their systems. When we commit the same error: when we make anti-communism, for instance, the only criteria for our friendship and national support, we end up with oppressive dictators as our friends, and the millions of people they are oppressing as our enemies. A lesson in our humanity is a precious reminder of the limitations of anything human, even the ideologies for which we would die, or for which we are willing to volunteer that our children die. It is good, at times, to learn the lesson of Jacob - the fact that we all limp.

But that far country, wherever it is, is not our home. And the fact that on occasion we know it with a terrible clarity: the fact that we do experience the "essential homelessness" to which the theologian referred, the sin-sick heart for which there is a Balm in Gilead of the old Gospel hymn, the homesickness of a young boy in a far country, is evidence of the power of God's grace pulling at us, relentlessly, always, never giving up on us.

There is a power at work in us, reminding us who we are - making us restless, homesick, calling us home. The Hound of Heaven, Francis Thompson called it and wrote beautifully about God's relentless pursuit down across the labyrinth of the years. Divine activity in life, the Christian faith contends, is strong, subtle, and relentless. It is a love that does not let us go.

The Christian Gospel calls out of us a confession of dependence on God that most of us are reluctant to make. We want to find God, not be found by him. Grace, someone said recently, sounds unAmerican. We want to understand God, not be understood. We want to feel that our religiosity is a mark of our goodness, our piety, our faith, not a gift from outside ourselves. The final symbol of grace is a stumbling block...the cross of Jesus Christ. What it means is that God's love ultimately dies for us, heals us by laying down life itself. It is unlike anything that has ever happened or will ever happen.

The response then is not grim piety and humorless morality. The only response left is the joyful banquet of homecoming, the party thrown by the prodigal father. Again, let Robert Capon describe it: (the father) "wants his son home, not so they can spend their days in the confessional box, but so that, having gotten past that tiresome preliminary, they can both get on with the lavish party which is the specialty of their many-mansioned house...Grace is the celebration of life, relentlessly hounding all the non-celibrants in the world...shouting its way through the streets pounding at every door...until the prodigals come out and the elder brothers take their fingers out of their ears." (op. cit., p. 73)

The purpose is to welcome us home. It is to open us to the healing, redeeming love of God that can literally make us into new people, can literally give us each day as a new and unexpected gift, can literally remake us so that, home at last, each person, each relationship becomes a precious treasure, a surprise, a good gift of God.

One of the joys of maturing is to understand more and more about the dynamics between that father, running down the road to welcome his son, and that particularly unloveable child. The older you get, the more plausible grace becomes, I find. The older you become the more you realize that it's a miracle of grace if anyone loves you. The time does come when most of us finally see the truth, namely that good, human love is always grace: that it has to do not with our merit, our attractiveness, our loveableness - all very transitory conditions - but with the grace of that person - that woman or man or child who somehow finds it possible to continue loving us, putting up with us, tolerating us, hoping with us, standing with us to the end. The time does come when we see, at last, that God's grace, in Jesus Christ, calls us home, then welcomes us home, and that we are finally, in Karl Barth's famous metaphor "left with the great humility, the thankfulness of the child presented with many gifts." Thanks be to God for that. Amen.

The first is about a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness to search for one who is lost. The second story is about a woman who turns her house upside down looking for one lost coin. The final story is about a man who had two sons. It is a story about grace.

What this story is not about is a prodigal son. It is a misleading designation. Prodigality means to be wasteful in a reckless way, to squander, or it can mean to be generous or lavish. In both cases the character who is prodigal is the father, and a close second is the fatted calf. The sons I would submit simply act like people usually act.

Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest who writes novels about grace, turned up last Sunday in the magazine section of The New York Times in a new feature, "For Men Only." The topic was "Fathers and Sons." Capon observes: "It is a tribute to the indestructibility of human nature that males can spend some 18 years in a paternal presence that is by turns mute and explosive, tyrannical and charming, aloof and meddling, heartless and sentimental, omnipotent and fragile - and still not have to be carried out feet first." (NYT Magazine, 9/18/83, p. 110)

The sons in this story - the fellow out spending the family fortune in sin city, and the sour martyr working overtime in the field, are acting normally. The father is not. He is prodigal: he is unusual. Bill Cosby does a routine on his own experience as a son and a father which illustrates. He confesses to abiding skepticism about the accuracy of the George Washington story involving the cutting down of a cherry tree, George's honesty about his culpability and his father's marvelous even-handed acceptance and refusal to punish George. Fathers, Cosby notes - don't act like that. Any father he knew would at least ask the boy what he was thinking about - and muse out loud whether the boy was capable of rational thought.

The parable of the man and two sons is about God and a love so extravagant it borders on the foolish. The parable is about a love so unusual, so without conditions, that it comes to have a power of its own. Something was working on that young boy as he slopped the hogs in a far country, and experienced a hunger so deep he contemplated eating the stocks he was feeding to the pigs. It was more than physical emptiness. When he remembered a full larder and place at the table - what he remembered truly was a love which was still loving him, and a place at the table still being held for him, and even though he constructed that homecoming speech and rehearsed it over and over, he knew he'd never have to say it, never get to say it. He knew when he came to the brow of the hill and looked across that valley - he'd see his father there, waiting. And all of that, more than physical hunger, turned the son around and brought him home. The name for it is grace.

It is what is unique about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Religion is mainly a human device to persuade God to love us. The idea is simple. God has rules. If we obey the rules God will love us, treat us generously. If we disobey the rules God will hate us and we will be treated badly. The name of the process by which we define, describe, and enforce the rules is "religion."

The abiding power of that dynamic is always a surprise. I stopped for gas early this morning - sometimes prodigal sons leave it on empty - and as I stepped up to the window with my collar on a man buying cigarettes, obviously on his way home from an all-night celebration, said, "Oh, oh, Father - you caught me. Guess I better go to church this morning." That's religion.

We can expect the living Christ to continue to challenge the mentality which chooses to escalate the arms race to guarantee security - against the counsel of a multitude of experts who now see the futility of that. We should expect the spirit of the living Christ to challenge us - as our House of Representatives responds to uncertainty by funding more MX missiles and the resumption, after 15 years, of the testing of nerve gas.

Thinking like that can get you in trouble. Ernest Campbell writes: "This is how Jesus got nailed to a cross. He lived in flagrant independence of all the principalities and powers. We keep clutching our Social Security cards, our pension plans, our bankbooks, our stocks. And we want to know why we are not free."

Those who followed him found new life, life deeper, richer, passionate, full. Those willing to let go found something in following him infinitely more precious than the old certainties. So the summons, the call, comes to each of us, not necessarily in a blinding flash of light, or cataclysmic emotional upheaval - but perhaps in a relentless dissatisfaction with the quality of life we are leading: perhaps in a late-night discovery that the certainties for which we live and die are not so certain after all. The call of Jesus Christ comes, I believe, to each and though the sense of it is as different as we are, the essence is always to let go, to loosen our grip, to lay down nets and follow.

For some that may mean radical departure: letting go of job, life style, and moving on to another place. But for most it is not a matter of radical displacement, but internal change. We are called, someone observed, not to imitate Jesus, not to be carbon copy disciples, but to follow him with integrity where we are. What we may have to let go are old patterns, old habits, old ways of living and relating in order to move into the new life. For some it will mean letting go of controlling, manipulating behavior in our marriages, our families, our vocations, and adopting a new, open, and loving posture.

For all of us, to hear the call of Christ, to let go, will mean a conversion at the deepest level of the soul. Spiritually, we are most uncomfortable with the thought of not being in control, predictable, secure. But it is precisely to this new open handed faith that our Lord calls us. At a level so deep we are uncomfortable even discussing it, we are called to trust him: to trust Jesus Christ with our future, our welfare, our happiness. At the deepest level of the soul we are called to let go.

The promise is that when we let go of all that is impermanent, temporary, and nonessential, we will encounter that which is ultimately real, permanent, eternal, namely the love of God. The promise is that when we let go, we are held in arms that are everlasting. Amen.

follow where God was leading. You know the story: they were elderly, childless, well-to-do, settled. And suddenly God tells them to let go of all of that; let go, pack up and move to a strange new place, where old Sarah will conceive and have a baby who will be the first of a mighty nation. One writer speculates about how the neighbors must have reacted to the hair-brained scheme: "Don't leave home! Enjoy! You've worked hard and done well! You're home safe. Don't throw it all away for a wild dream." (R. Raines, Going Home, p. 27)

"They left their nets and followed him," is the strikingly direct way the Gospel according to Mark describes Jesus' encounter with men who would become disciples: Simon, Andrew, James, John. He didn't query them as to their understanding of historic monotheism in relationship to the polytheistic cult of Rome. He didn't even ask about their morals. He simply summoned them to follow and the response was in the form, first, of letting go - of livelihood, job, camaraderie, way of life: letting go of every structure of meaning and security upon which their lives had been built.

Human sin, the theologians teach, is not so much doing bad things, committing ethical blunders as it is trying to build one's life, one's security, on the wrong foundation. Unlike the other living things in the created order, we know about our own mortality. You and I will never be as unselfconsciously free as the birds, the rabbits, the dogs. They are free of that which concerns us fundamentally. They think they'll live forever. They don't know any better, but we do. And so we hold tightly to whatever feels like security, permanance, safety. We squeeze, grasp, protect - whatever it is that seems to be an antidote to mortality: a person, a job, a stock portfolio, a reputation, a house. We hold on literally, for dear life until there is no strength in us, and more often than not the accumulated squeezing and holding has pressed the life and beauty and meaning out of whatever it is - the relationships, the reputation, the job. Nowhere do the ideas of faith and sin collide with such strength as here.

The dynamic pervades our lives. What is the most important thing your parents taught you? There is only one answer to that question. The most important thing parents teach children is how to be a person without them, how to stand alone, how to be - without parents. That's what parenting is about. Nothing is more critical than the way in which the person moves away from parental security, into the frightening world of independence, autonomy and wholeness. Bruno Bettleheim notes how frequently the motif turns up in the fantasy stories of children. And writes, "...being pushed out of the home stands for having to become oneself. Self-realization requires leaving the orbit of the home, an excruciatingly painful experience..." (The Uses of Enchantment, p. 79)

Philosopher Sam Keen underscores the point by observing that "letting go" is the essence of that developmental earthquake called adolescence, and laments that permissive parents shortcut the process by "refusing to be committed to any values against which young people might rebel." (The Passionate Life, p. 75) He writes: "To say a single 'yes', we must say 'no' a hundred times. The first and hardest 'no' is the decision to sever our ties with home, to endure the alienation that inevitably comes from leaving all that is familiar. Our temptation is to remain in safety, beyond tragedy. But if we do, all the delightful virtues of childhood will become twisted into independent vices. Instead of becoming responsible, we will be reactionary: instead of creative, conservative." (p. 62)

A moment ago I spoke about expressing emotions. It would be wrong to leave the impression that a person is less than human if he does not show his feelings openly. Some people do not express emotion visibly. Within themselves they may struggle with the same emotions of grief, but they insist on handling it by themselves. They don't want anyone "meddling" in their lives by trying to help with such a personal thing as grief. We usually should honor such a need for privacy.

The great majority of us, however, need to let loose of our emotions and we are strengthed when we do. We need the warm affection and encouragement of those around us. As we receive such caring, we begin to sense that there are still opportunities for meaningful life.

All of which is to say that grief can be used creatively, for good. By its very nature life is filled with real and difficult losses, both large and small. And let there be no mistake: The process of grief is painful, never pleasant; it is marked far more by oppressive darkness than by sunshine rays of obvious hope. But grief helps us overcome the fact of loss. It helps us survive and move through and beyond the darkness. Grieving is the process by which we are healed and returned to confident life.

Our grief is based on a faith and a hope. Grief helps us know that faith and hope after a shattering loss, perhaps know faith and hope more fully than ever. Therefore, when large or small loss comes, remember the Bible teaching: "Grieve not as those who have no hope," but, indeed, grieve!

Let us pray:
Most gracious, loving God, we thank you for the care you give in our times of sorrow. And we rejoice that through faith in you our life has a depth which grief cannot erase, a depth which allows us to live triumphantly in Christ's name. Amen.

> But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep (in death), that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (I Thessalonians 4:9-14, 18)

Christians shouldn't grieve--the words are there alright. But the whole passage says something else and something more: We should "not grieve as others do who have no hope." That is, the Christian **does** grieve, but with the difference that we have a hope. Jesus put it this way: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

What is the hope? What is the comfort? Well, consider the most drastic form of sorrow—sorrow caused by death. Faced with death, our own or the death of a loved one, our hope, the comfort of those who mourn, can be put very simply: We believe God creates our life so we can find fulfillment. We observe that death is an inescapable part of life; therefore, death must also be designed by God. Without going into theological subtleties, then, logic concludes that God intends death as part of human fulfillment. We can confidently reach that conclusion even though we don't have complete knowledge of all the details. Therefore, we have a hope, a comfort, which transforms our deepest grieving over death itself. All griefs are meant to be part of our fulfillment, just as our joys are.

I suppose that reading the congregation's memorials during last Sunday's worship made me more sensitive than usual, but I'm amazed how often I've been a part of grief conversations this week. It was a mother's death on one occasion. In two instances church members were faced with the sadness of moving parents into nursing homes. Another learned a parent has cancer. Another realized her long illness prohibits attending a favorite relative's wedding. Two marriages breaking up, a forced early retirement, the vividly painful recollection of a spouse's death, the loss of ability to talk, failing eyesight, feeling abandoned by old friends...that is quite a range of serious sorrows to witness in just a few days. Clearly, it is the very nature of life to experience sorrow in many ways.

A loss first brings us a sense of shock. We are made in such a way that we can bear pain and sorrow and even tragedy. However, when the sorrow, the tragedy, is overwhelming, often we are temporarily anesthetized by shock. We should be grateful for such anesthesia, for it keeps us from having to face the entire grim reality all at once. This shock stage may last anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours to a few days. Sometimes it may persist to an unhealthy extent and then help is needed. But the shock of grief's early stage is not to be feared.

There are times when you visit the funeral home and see a bereaved wife who appears almost radiant. People comment: "What serene faith she has!" We are so mistaken to equate faith with a stoical attitude, and not with tears. The truth of the matter may well be that the woman is experiencing a temporary anesthesia, which is helping her along until she is ready to move to the next stage of grief.

I remember well a man who was unexpectedly fired from a job he had held for twenty years--that's a loss to cause deep grief. He told about his state of shock in these words: "I was so stunned that I walked around like I was in a trance. What they said just did not register. I heard the words, but they had not 'reached' me yet." He had this temporary anesthesia.

How good and pleasant when brothers and sisters dwell in unity. It is like a blessing - an ultimate benediction - life forevermore. Words are not adequate: it does require dancing and imagining and remembering.

The Wednesday morning headline announced "Christians Won't Talk to Syrians." What they don't want to talk about, of course, is Mt. Hermon - Lebanon - where God's dew still falls and God's sons and daughters have been gleefully killing one another for hundreds of years. There is judgment here for those strong enough to stand under it. Mark Twain was expert at weaving it into his comic - tragic vision fo our humanity.

> He wrote: "I built a cage, and in it I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training I got the dog and the cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, goat, kangaroo, some birds, and a monkey. And after a few adjustments they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such succeses that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Moslem...a Buddhist...along with a Baptist missionary...And in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage."

There is judgment here because the record is not good. "Religion," Reinhold Niebuhr observed, "is the last battleground between God and humanity." And nowhere is that clearer than the dismal role religion has played in the finely honed art of war. The Rev. Ian Paisley and his evangelical friends are a major part of the problem in Northern Ireland. What transpires in Lebanon is not a theological struggle, but the people who are killing one another are religiously identifiable.

There is judgment here because the day before the "Christians Won't Talk" headline the newspaper announced new solidarity between China and the United States as a result of Secretary of Defense Weinburger's visit; and then spelled out that new and curious definition of solidarity - the results of which will be a better equipped Chinese army, more favorable balance of payments and happy American weapons manufacturers.

In counterpoint to the sweetness of the Biblical imagery, we must tune in the sounds of the world. Many of those sounds are warnings:

> Norman Cousins: "Our number one problem is the increasing possibility of nuclear war. Our number two problem is that our best minds aren't working on our number one problem."

> Terry Sanford, President, Duke University: "The end mission of the people of the United States is not to build an armed camp to face the other armed camps of the world. And yet that is what we are doing. We can do better than that." (Time Magazine, June 1983)

Judgment...Warning...and Challenge. People of good will, on World Communion Sunday are challenged, I submit, to hear the Gospel; to listen to it at precisely that point where it challenges personal behavior, attitudes, priorities. The challenge today is to acknowledge the simple truth that the first priority in the Bible is reconciliation, healing, bringing together that which life breaks apart. The essential harmony

Who are we? The Marxist answer is cogs in the larger gear, our purpose - to serve the state. The Fascist answer is - part of the folk, the people who exist to obey the leader. Our culture's answer seems to be - consumers, with needs manufactured by one segment of the economy called advertising, to be met by another segment of the economy called manufacturing.

imago dei here mirror - Craddock we remember Eden -

The Christian word is that we are more than that. Niebuhr wrote: "Man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God. Only in that confrontation does he become aware of his full statue...in him." (vol. II, p. 131)

To be human is to understand the significance of our insignificance. It is to look into the mystery of a starry sky and ask, in total wonder - "Who am I? In this incomprehensible universe; how is it that I am?" To confront God is to know the whole truth - our greatness and our smallness: our potential and our sin.

It is to expect much of humanity - including our own. It is to expect compassion and justice and integrity and to be unsatisfied with anything less. It is to expect much morally of humanity, including our own - and - it is to know that we will stumble, fall short, fail and that without forgiveness, grace, acceptance, human life in relationship is not possible.

Nowhere is the word about us clearer than in the one who is himself the Word of God, Jesus Christ. There is something about our humanity which is defined, by the fact that it has been visited by the divine. There is something about you - and me - which is revealed by the fact that Jesus the Christ was one of us. "Jesus is the revelation of our human life and not its proudest exception," a theologian puts it. (John Shea, The Challenge of Jesus, in E. Campbell's Notebook, vol. 3, no. 3)

Jesus is human life - yours - mine - as God means it to be. And Jesus is redeemer, the one whose life is the promise that God does not write us off when we fail to measure up. The deepest truth of all, almost inexpressible, is that in Jesus Christ, God covers human sinfulness, human failure, with love and creative power and new potential.

Who are we? We are part of the created order: men and women who live and move and have being by the divine rhythm of expectation and grace: men and women who can be at home with their humanity, at peace with who they are, yet always striving, reaching, expecting more of other people, themselves, the world: yet people who, when they fall short of those divine expectations, know themselves gloriously forgiven and accepted by God - which discovery empowers them to forgive self, to get up and try again.

That is who we are...saints who fall - sinners who are forgiven - which is to say - children of God; loved of God; accepted of God.

No wonder the Psalmist ended, as he began:

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth." Amen.

Settler
m identity

Who are we? We weary, at times, of the question. Why not just get on with life and forget about trying to define who we are. "I was never bothered by a lack of self identity," a professor of mine said once, "because no one ever told me I had a self to identify." I was talking with three bright young people one time about why they didn't participate in the youth group at their church. "Because all they do is sit around and have discussions about who they are," one answered, and her brother, to punctuate, added "If anyone else asks me who I really am I'm gonna be sick." (That one is now a Presbyterian minister!)

Yet our impatience with the abstraction notwithstanding, it is the question. Academecians know it and always have. The nature of humanity is the problem. Anthropology and theology are not so very distant. Granted, most of us don't pursue it abstractly, academically: nevertheless the answer to the question of who we are gets expressed in our mores, our institutions, our social policy, ultimately our government. Public education, the Franklin County Welfare system, the Mental Health facilities express our view of who we are.

Personally, it is expressed in the way we treat one another; the way we relate to spouses, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, enemies.

What is man? Who are we?" We are, at least, a puzzle, an enigma. We can produce an Albert Schweitzer and an Adolf Hitler, simultaneously. We construct bombers and cathedrals and destroy our cathedrals with our bombers. We invest in prisons and concert halls. We spend our money testing nerve gas and artificial hearts. Our technology is so precise we can sit in our homes and hear the Russian pilot, at 35,000 feet, closing on the 747, talking about firing the missile, but we don't know the words to say that will make him stop.

Who are we? There are two positions essentially. Call the first one the high view, the second, the low view. On the side of the high view put all the liberalizing, humanizing, idealizing, lofty visions of a humanity becoming more civilized with each generation, growing in statue to new heights of compassion and justice and goodness. The high view expressed itself in efforts to improve the human condition; to build more houses, and feed more people, and cure more diseases. It is us - at our best. It is the classic, the Renaissance view: in art - Michaelangelo's magnificent David, in literature Shakespeare:

"What a piece of work is man.
How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty.
In form and moving how express and admirable,
In action how like an angel.
In apprehension how like a God."

And one thinks of them - the Schweitzers, and the Mother Theresas, and the Martin Luther Kings, and the Pope Johns. And that is the weakness of the high view. The same humanity is expressed more modestly elsewhere and with great, great evil occasionally. Schweitzer and Hitler were contemporaries and countrymen, and while he doesn't necessarily define our humanity, Adolf Eichmann was one of us too.

And so, the low view: Freud said we are a product of deep, subconscious impulses, and though we learn how to behave appropriately, most of the time, it is all a charade essentially. And Karl Marx suggested that we are driven by an economic determinism, and the new biology is suggesting that we are a product of a genetic

Solzhenitsyn warns that the only hope for Western civilization is a profound change of heart. That is a religious matter of the first order. Political scientists know that republics last only so long as their citizens love them. May I suggest three ways to love our nation.

First, an emotional commitment. Fly a flag on occasion. Care enough to invest emotionally. Chrysler chairman Lee Iacocca told the graduating class at the University of Michigan recently, "The only thing we seem to be missing is the determination...I want you to get mad about the current state of affairs. I want you to get so mad you kick your elders in their figurative posteriors and move America off dead center. Our nation was born when 56 patriots got mad enough to sign the Declaration of Independence...Getting mad in a constructive way is good for the soul - and the country." (Time, June 13, 1983)

Second, an intellectual commitment. Learn the truth. Read, read, read, not just the journals and papers that tell it the way you like hearing it, but particularly those which tell it the other way. Read the Call and Post, as well as the Dispatch; Newsweek as well as U.S. News and World Report. Read hard enough to satisfy yourself that you have some manageable concept of what is actually happening. Read hard enough to learn what you don't want to know: that poor children die at a rate three times that of not poor in this country; that forty percent of the poor black urban children in this country between five and nine are not immunized; that nine billion dollars was cut out of federal programs for disease prevention and lifeline support for poor families last year by Congress and the administration. (see New Yorker, p. 26, June 27, 1983)

Third - commit your will, your intention. Set your face and do something.

The COMPASS program of this church is trying to stand with the poor. COMPASS needs help. Why not invest the money the Congress gave us last Wednesday in the commonwealth? Invest that money in the human family. Better yet, volunteer: come down and help a few hours a week. Or write letters, or call congressmen, or contribute to your party.

The decision to go to Jerusalem was the most critical choice Jesus ever made. It cost him his life. It showed us how human life was meant to be lived. It demonstrated that profound Christian truth, that in losing life you find it: that in investing self in the common good, you realize more fully your own personhood.

Jesus the Christ came to Jerusalem and forever defined the locus of the Gospel as the fulcrum of life: yours and mine too. In Christ - God loves us where we are: in Christ, God bids us follow. Amen.

Jesus went to Jerusalem because he loved his nation. He went because there was no way for him to express that love honestly, and not go.

The issues are far from resolved. The venerable idiom, "religion and politics don't mix," is mouthed universally, with a straight face, by people who should and do know better. I have discovered that what the phrase means ordinarily is..."I don't appreciate the criticism religion is presuming to make of my particular politics. Religious support for my positions, on the other hand, and criticism of the other side is always welcome.

Pope John Paul's visit to Poland recently is most instructive. Free men and women the world over were inspired by what he did and said. Who will ever forget the picture of the Pope, in white Robe, listening with intense strength, to the military head of the government trying to rationalize martial law and the absence of basic human rights in his land? After I mentioned it last week, someone was kind enough to refer me to James Russell Lowell's magnificent poem The Present Crisis.

"When a deed is done for freedom, through the broad earth's aching breast
Runs a thrill of joy prophetic, trembling on from East to West
And the slave, wher'er he cowers, feels the soul within him climb
To the awful verge of manhood, as the energy sublime
Of a century bursts full-blossomed on the thorny stems of time."

John Paul II acted and spoke out of that strong Judeo Christian tradition: a prophet whose face was set to go to the city. How easy it is to be inspired by that when it is someone else's city, someone else's system. Already Vatican officials are leaking suggestions to the press that after all he is Polish and he may have overdone it a bit. And in this country, while the Pope is applauded for confronting totalitarianism of the left, his Bishops are roundly condemned for confronting totalitarianism of the right in Central and South America. And the American Bishops, setting their collective face to confront the matter of nuclear terror as the keystones of American foreign policy, are told - of all things - to stop meddling in politics.

I propose that the highest and best of our religion calls us - not to retreat from the world with all its political ambiguity and complexity, but to involvement in the world as responsible citizens. I propose Jesus, setting his face to go to Jerusalem as model for his latter day followers. I propose the love of Jesus for people and nation as foundation. We are called to love our nation, I believe. The hard-hats were right in the sixties, at least their instincts were right, with the beligerant slogan: "America - Love It or Leave It." What was missing from much of the Vietnam protest, they sensed, was love of nation, loyalty to nation, passionate affection for everything they held dear. They were wrong, of course, in equating all protest, all objection, with disloyalty. "Love It Right or Leave It" they should have said: love it thoughtfully, loyally, critically, intelligently, and passionately.

"We can't leave patriotism to the demagogues," Professor Walter Wink said recently, and Martin Marty saw things clearly when he lamented that the trouble with our country is "the committed aren't civil, and the civil aren't committed."

I propose that our religion calls us to civil commitment to the body politic, to an involved, informed and thoughtful love for our nation. It can be, urged altruistically as simple civic responsibility. Time Magazine, in the regular "Presidency" feature quoted Plato..."He who refuses to rule is liable to be ruled by one who is worse than himself." And better still, James Madison's sharp observation in 1788..."As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires...circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in which justify...esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form."

At first a new idea is invisible and abstract. It can't be measured or photographed. Then the discoverer writes down a part of the growing idea as a short magazine article and, if in a scholarly field, perhaps several articles are written, each describing a different facet or application of the main idea. Then, the idea having expanded, a book is published to describe as thoroughly as possible the whole idea and all its ramifications. Now the idea is solid and concrete. The book is published, is passed from person to person and the idea is communicated from mind to mind. It becomes a part of the life of a great many people who had never thought of that idea before.

So, here we have three separate realities: an idea, a book and the influence of the book. These three are not separate really; they are closely connected. One without the other two would mean very little. What good is an idea which no one ever hears of; or a book which has no influence, no impact; or influence without a good central idea to guide it? And the discoverer, the originator, the author, the inventor is in all three of these.

So, too, the creative power of God is invisible. It grows and expands and moves toward becoming fully concrete throughout the experiences of the people of Israel — the burning bush, the deliverance from bondage, the lives of the prophets — just as the discoverer's idea was partially expressed and grew little by little in the magazine and journal articles. Then as in the book, this creative power takes substance in the person Jesus of Nazareth who embodies completely God's creativity, for that is what redemption through Christ is. The influence of Jesus then radiates in all directions and the Holy Spirit becomes an influence upon people in all places and in all times. All three are connected and God is in all three.

The truth expressed by the Doctrine of the Trinity, then, says these things to us. In this manner we know God — the creative power traditionally called Father, the created substance which is Son, and the influence which follows and continues and dwells with us and in us forever — the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Most gracious, loving God, help us to stretch our understandings, to appreciate your care for us, and to experience your presence powerfully active in our world and in our lives. May we combine the wisdom we receive from previous generations and from distant lands with our own insights, our own experiences of the divine encounter, so we will live confidently to serve you, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

good Hebrew and Greek words that describe a wide range of divine attributes. The result was a very narrow, impoverished concept of God as male. The church is learning better now and is beginning to re-discover the full Biblical appreciation of God. We are still tied to scholarly references and Bible translations from the past. But they can express the truth of the Doctrine of the Trinity even when nouns and pronouns are wrong, as you will hear in some quotations.

He who has seen me has seen God, Jesus told his diciples. And we confess that is true, for as we learn of Christ we think of God in terms of the teaching, the life, and the sacrifice of Jesus. Then, continuing his teaching to the disciples, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth...: you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you." And these words set forth perhaps the first expression of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

One of the earliest church leaders described the doctrine this way: "belief in one God, existent in and manifest under three modes or aspects of being" and these three aspects were purely temporary. Well, that certainly clears it all up. If that sentence is as hard for you to swallow as for me, maybe we'll find the nineteenth-century Englishman James Martineau more helpful. This is his definition: "The Father is God in himself; the Son is God manifested in the universe and in history, and brought to focus in the frame of redemption; while the Holy Spirit is God in communion with man's inner spirit."

Regardless who is describing the Doctrine of the Trinity, the beginning point must be with God the Creator. The important statement here comes first out of the experience of ancient Israel: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God, the Lord is one." That is, we cannot divide our allegiance between two or more little gods or idols. We cannot worship at the altar of security or success or pride and still serve God. God is one and demands our full loyalty.

This belief in one God is known as ethical monotheism. It was developed through the history of the Old Testament people. The utterances of the prophets, the leading through the wilderness from Egypt to the promised land, the survival and growth of the tiny unprotected nation Israel, the punishment of the nation in the time of exile — all these were understood by the Israelites as showing the power of the one God. Knowing that God is one is essential and true, but the centuries of Israel's swinging back and forth between faithfulness and unfaithfulness demonstrated that humanity needed a fuller knowledge of God. So, for the Christian, two new facts of history and experience have changed our thought of the one eternal God.

The first of these new facts is Jesus of Nazareth. He brought God near in a new, intimate way. Firm believers in the unity of God found themselves thinking of Jesus whenever they thought of God. They knew that God was like Christ and that God was in Christ. Yet Jesus was not God, for he suffered pain and death. He was truly human. He was the incarnation of God. So they came to speak of the Father and the Son; and even if they couldn't quite explain it or think it out, it was at the very heart of their faith.

week before Christmas. She feared for her life. A man had been assaulting her regularly for two years and the situation had worsened. She was the mother of his child and he threatened to kidnap the baby and do her great physical harm. The story goes on. But two months later and with the legal counsel of a member of this congregation, and the assistance of COMPASS, this young woman is free from the bondage of fear. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his ministry quoting the prophet Isaiah and saying, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives." Thank you for giving me the freedom and for supporting me to minister in this way.

I have been gifted in learning more concretely that God speaks to us in our everyday lives. God calls us to leave our native soil, community, people, for the sake of a promise that we do not fully understand. God is not bound to local soil, but is the God of history, the God of our lives. One of the great joys of ministry is the opportunity to share in the lives of others in times of great joy and sorrow. The task of the parish theologian is not to merely share the experience, but to try to understand life experiences from the perspective of faith. That means asking some hard questions and hearing the tough questions of others. One experience stands out in my mind. A woman was dying of cancer. She had suffered many months and was very thin and weak and close to death. Her daughter asked that I take communion to her in the hospital. And so the three of us met one Sunday afternoon. As I began the communion liturgy, the woman began to cry -- first softly and then rather uncontrollably. I was not sure whether to continue or to stop. I decided to trust God's grace in the mystery of sharing bread and wine. Several times during the liturgy the woman, who had been too weak to speak for days said, "This is not enough!" What a troubling thought to a new pastor. I thought to myself "Of course it's not enough, but it's the most I have to offer." Part of the lesson for me was that it was not what I had to offer at all. I was right to feel inadequate. But when at the end of communion the woman interrupted me and said she wanted to give the final prayer, I knew as I had never known before the deep power of the Lord's Supper. God's presence was known in the breading of bread.

To be a part of people's lives is a priviledge beyond words. For as a minister I much admire told me, "Sharing the lives of people is walking on sacred ground." Such is what Frederick Buechner expressed in his autobiography, The Sacred Journey, "To try to express in even the most insightful and theologically sophistocated terms the meaning of what God speaks through the events of our lives is as precarious a business as to try to express the meaning of the sound of rain on the roof and the spectacles of the setting sun. But I choose to believe that he speaks nonetheless and the reason that his words are impossible to capture in human language is, of course, that they are ultimately always incarnate words. They are words fleshed out in the everydayness no less than in the crises of our own experience."

My time as a sojourner with this congregation has sharpened my desire for intellectual growth. The Calvinist view that religion is faith seeking understanding has been challenged and nurtured in the classes and small groups I have taught. My belief that one reason for being in a faith community is that we learn best by reflecting and being challenged by the ideas and experiences of others has been confirmed. I have loved my teaching ministry here -- which I know has been more learning than teaching. I'm grateful that my thirst for understanding grows. I felt this well expressed by the great black mystic, Howard Thurman, when he wrote, "Always there seems to be something more to be experienced, to be felt, to know. My mind rejects any conclusion as being final. The greatest source of hope, therefore, for both the present and the future, is the awareness of potential in me, in other people, in life itself."

Of the litany of gifts I have received from you there is one other I would like to mention. At my recent Dialogue with the Clergy interview, I was asked what I had found

What makes all of this more than a flight of theological fancy is the fact that it has to do with our deepest yearnings, our most urgent needs. Herbert Benson, physician and professor on the faculty of Harvard Medical School, in a widely read book, The Relaxation Response, points out that deep breathing is the oldest, most universally acknowledged spiritual discipline. Ancient people, mostly in Eastern cultures, knew that to breathe consciously, to reflect on the physical action of breathing, to feel the inhalation and exhalation, was to be in touch with the essence of something too profound for words. It was to know life -aliveness - in an acute way. So, breathing techniques are part of meditation and prayer disciplines in many of the world religions. Benson suggests, that jogging is good, if only because it forces deep breathing - which we ought to be doing anyway. We know, intuitively, that is to say, that there is more to breath than a little whisp of air. We know, I believe, what it means when stress and worry and fear constrict that apparatus. We know, without being told that a symptom of deep anxiety is the inability to take a full breath and that somehow our very spirit is involved in that situation.

One of my favorite authors writes that "Sighs are tears not yet released into the world" and that "The sound of my own breathing is evidence of God's present invigoration of my life." (Robert Raines, The Faithing Oak)

We know, I think, what it means to be breathless: to be depleted spiritually. Busy, hard working people know all too well what it means to spend everythinig - physically, emotionally and spiritually - for vocation, family, community, church. A very wise pastor friend of mine used to say to clergy, or anyone who would listen, that there is a ten to twenty year period in the middle of life when most of us are giving out more than we are taking in: to marriage, to children, to community responsibility, to profession. It is a period of spiritual deficient spending, and the price we pay for it is very, very high in terms of stress, alcoholism, heart attacks, and a bundle of personal and relational problems. Most of us, my guess is, know about spiritual deficits.

Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news. It is the promise that when we have emptied ourselves, when we have given everything we have to give, God the life-giver, God the Spirit who is life itself, will restore and heal and refill and renew and recreate us by breathing again breath of life into us.

No where is that said with more gentleness and beauty than a lovely Appalachian hymn:

The lone, wild bird in lofty flight
Is still with thee, nor leaves thy sight.
And I am thine! I rest in thee.
Great Spirit, come, and rest in me. Amen.

The account evokes powerful images out of the past, primarily that marvelous creation story in Genesis 2 which we heard earlier. God fashions a man out of the dust of the earth, like a potter, an artist, and breathes his own breath into the man and the man lives. The breath - which can be translated "spirit" or wind which hovered over the formless void before creation; the divine energy which exists before anything else exists.

Jesus, in this incident in John's Gospel, breathes on his disicples and gives them new life just as God animated the lifeless human form he had constructed out of dust. Jesus gives them his spirit, his life, in the act John calls, breathing on them.

God, the Bible seems to be saying, is something like that mysterious and powerful breath. The late Paul Tillich was enormously helpful in teaching that God may be described as "the ground of being": the very essence of life itself. One of the major hurdles for modern American Christians is a very basic Biblical way of talking about God. God, in the Bible, is not a passive idea, or a concept, or a proposition, but a power, a dynamic energy seething with potentiality and promise. God, in the Bible, is not thought about so much as experienced - in the Bible the question "What is God like" is answered by telling what God does. "Who is God?" We start out answering that question like this - "God is a supreme being, infinite, all powerful, omnipotent." The Old Testament, on the other hand, answers the question "Who is God?" like this: "God is the one who brought us out of Egypt." The word "God" in the Bible points, not to a philosophic thesis, but to the power which is behind and in and through all life. God, I would propose, is that which distinguishes life from death. God is life, energy: the force that turns the primal chaos into order: the power that takes the shapelessness of the void and fills it with mountains and galaxies and oceans teaming with living things. God is that mysterious force which shows itself in the astounding fact that single-cell amoebas actually live; the mysterious vitality in gorillas and sharks and whippoorwills and Homo Sapiens. In the Bible God is the force which makes us hunger for and need one another and in the hungering and needing assures that we will celebrate the goodness of life and guarantee its continuation. This God who lived so fully in Jesus is the very breath of life.

There are important implications here. The first is that God is that which gives life to everything that lives. As basic as that sounds, the unfortunate truth is that Christian people have often been persuaded to act as if life were a cosmic mistake, an accident that slipped in the back door of the world as it were. It has its origins in Greek dualism apparently which held that tangible, created matter, was hopelessly despoiled, dirty, and evil; that holiness is a product of avoiding getting one's hands dirty in life. What the Christian Church has always been tempted to do is take the idea of the Spirit - the breath of God - and turn it into some ethereal, other worldly idiom. But it means life. God's spirit is what makes life - life. Rather than denying it, avoiding it, cloistering our religious rituals away from it, we people of faith are called to affirm it, to be in it, to love it and enjoy it for all we are worth.

One who helps me do that is Lewis Thomas, Director of the Sloane Kettering Cancer Clinic, columnist for New England Journal of Medicine and author. In The Medusa and the Snail he writes about the public reaction to the much publicized "test-tube babies."

And that always suggests to me that there is a dimension to all of us; a religious dimension, an imaginative, open-eyed, playful part which is terribly important for our own wholeness, but when everything about the life we live conspires to repress. "Unless you become like children," he said.

A decade or so ago a psychiatrist by the name of Harris gave us a whole new way to look at ourselves which we may find helpful. I'm OK/Your OK was the book title and in it Harris taught that each person has three separate personalities - or ego states: a parent, an adult, and a child. Most of us, Harris maintained, establish early in life that the child is "not OK" and spend the rest of life keeping it out of the limelight. Listen to how Harris described that child in us.

"In the child is a vast store of positive data. In the child reside creativity, curiosity, the desire to explore and know, the urges to touch and feel and experience and the recordings of the glorious, pristine feelings of first discoveries. In the child are recorded the countless, grand a-ha experiences, the firsts in the life of the small person..." (p. 27)

You see, it is there, in the child in us, Jesus understood, that the basic religious impulse is experienced. It is there, he understood, that you and I can experience the love of God. The parent in us is busy worrying about the fact that we might not deserve that love; the parent is occupied with the project of creating projects designed to earn God's love, and reasons to feel bad and guilty and unworthy. The adult in us, meanwhile, is busy posing very serious questions, academic, grown-up concerns, about the nature of the God whose love we are discussing. It is the child in us which is capable of being loved and of loving in response. Another way of saying that is the way Jesus said it. "Unless you become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of God." Still another way is to suggest, as that wise old story did, that sometimes the simple donkey can see an angel which the preoccupied religious adult is missing.

Christian baptism understands that, of course: understands that at the heart of the human story is a great mystery; whether you are dealing with semitic tribes, fighting their way into the promised land and being born as God's people in the process, or the actual breathtaking, stunning birth of an infant, at the heart of it is a great mystery. It is a mystery which will not be explained. The word "love" comes close. The sacramental act of cradling a child and placing water on a small head and saying words about love comes, for many of us, as close as we ever get to understanding it.

The ancient wisdom of the faith, expressed in a marvelous story about a talking donkey; expressed again when Jesus placed a child in the middle of his disciples and said "be like this," celebrated when we baptize our children, is perhaps best said in a simple petition... Bless them..Bless the beasts and the children...and bless us all. Amen.

I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." And the ass said to Balaam, "Am I not your ass, upon which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so to you?" and he said, "No." Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed his head, and fell on his face. And the angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have you struck your ass these three times? Behold, I have come forth to withstand you, because your way is perverse before me; and the ass saw me, and turned aside before me these three time. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have slain you and let her live." Then Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned, for I did not know that thou didst stand in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in thy sight, I will go back again." And the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men; but only the word which I bid you, that shall you speak." So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak. (Numbers 22:21-35)

We have always been intrigued with the possibility of talking with the animals, and with the provocative suggestion that they might have something to tell us; that they might know something we do not know. The idea has always been there it seems: from Dr. Doolittle actually Talking to the Animals, to James Herriot's charming sheep and terriers; from attempts to understand whale songs and gorilla gestures to the harmless silliness of the old Mr. Ed television show, we have been intrigued with the possibility that if the animals could talk they might have quite a bit to say. I'm not much of a track fan, but each year at derby time I wonder if the thoroughbreds know they are in a race when the bell rings and the gates open at Churchill Downs, and what would they say in the winners circle. William Blake, that marvelously mysterious English artist/poet, wrote a strange poem which I have always found compelling:

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare sieze the fire?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And watered heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?

Who can look at one of those magnificent animals and not think like that? Frederick Beuchner writes: "As fascinating as a message from outer space would be a message from the inner space of a great blue heron or a common house cat sunning herself on the kitchen linoleum. Their mute gaze suggests a vision of reality beyond our imagining. What do they see in their ignorance that we in our wisdom are mostly blind to?" (Peculiar Treasures, p. 13)

Surely part of what we must learn from this story is that the creatures with whom we share the earth do us many favors: they feed, clothe, carry, work for, and astonish us with their beauty. And perhaps the small snail, the humpback whale, the mountain gorillas, the California condor - dwindling to a precious few as our civilization make life impossible - do see the elemental economy of things far more clearly than we do.

Abraham and Sarah never made it to the promised land. (see Raines, p. 117) They spent their lives making it. Home, the Bible seems to be saying, is not a place at all, but the pilgrimage, the journey, and most of all, the relationships.

In the best story of all about the topic - the one Jesus told - home for the prodigal is not a place, but a relationship: not his father's house so much as his father's love. Home, theology has always understood, has everything in the world to do with love.

Not to have it is to be homesick, alone, lost. To be loved is to be at home. When we find ourselves grieving over the disappearance of the past; when we lament the sorry state of the home and the family, we need, it seems to me, the Biblical word. It is a good and important word. If I am reading the story right, it is that home may be in the present and the future as well as the past; that the God who gave us life initially, calls us to the pilgrimage of our particular lives and promises to bless us with his presence wherever that leads. God, if I read correctly, is our true home, as the hymn puts it.

The word for those of us who are living in nuclear families, and who are struggling with and worrying about forces which seem far beyond our ability to control - is: don't despair. Be of good cheer. God thought enough of the arrangement to have his only son born into it. God chose the process of human birth for the incarnation to happen. God chose that fragile, yet creatively strong complex of relationships between mother, father, and child as the formative context for the savior of the world. The word for us is that the institution is worth saving, that it is worth striving for, praying about, studying, and sometimes weeping over. The word is to value it highly and appropriately: but not to conclude that we have failed miserably as parents or that the foundations of Western Civilization are crumbling because our family doesn't look or act like a romanticized version that never really did exist. And the word is a reminder not to oversimplify and in the process exclude from our world the people who do not live in nuclear families - which means the vast majority. The biblical word is a reminder to open our lives to larger families: to find the uncles, aunts, grandparents, friends, we - all of us - need.

And the word for those who are not living in nuclear families is that nuclear families are not the only places where God's people live: that God is at least as interested in those who are not as settled and fixed in place. Without hearing more than the Biblical witness, the word here is that Jesus, in fact, left the place, the relationships, the roles, in order to give himself to his vocation: but that through it all, his own sense of sonship to his own mother remained. God, the Bible suggests, sometimes uproots people, and sends them on difficult journeys. God, the Bible promises, will be particularly present on those journeys.

And for all of us, with or without traditional home and nuclear family, the word is profoundly clear. Each of us can be alone, an exile forever, lost. But we don't have to be. We are so constructed as to need and to thrive on the supportive love of some caring community - a family. The church, this beloved company, at its highest and best becomes that for each one of us.

The word is profoundly and finally simple. Home is not past alone. It is that, of course. It is memory which, this day, is lovingly recalled and celebrated. It is a reality which provided formative nuture to each of us in a particular way. It is a mother, a father, people who will forever be our lifegivers. Home is also this present: this day: these relationships, here and now. And it is also the journey ahead: the future into which God calls us; the future in which God promises to be with us and bless us, to gather up our precious memories in his strong love and to be, himself, our eternal home. AMEN.

Years ago, Presbyterian theologian James Smart saw and wrote that the traditional functions of the family were being stripped away like so many layers from an onion. "Whose fault is it?" he asked and answered, "No one's and everyone's." After all, we are the ones who asked the schools, for instance, to teach values as well as reading. We are the ones who expect religion to be taught by the church school, outdoor skills by the scouts, social graces by the dancing class, and athletic ability by little league. We are the major conspirators in turning parenting into the task of delivering one's children, literally, into the hands of a multitude of expert teachers and then waiting patiently in the parking lot, listening to the car radio, to take them home afterward. We have turned the home into the 24-hour-a-day cafeteria and motel where the inhabitants occasionally bump into one another coming and going.

This is no lament, by the way. Just a description of the world in which we live and a plea to understand that the home didn't fall apart because of some moral flaw in the American character or because of permissiveness or because we don't use McGuffey's readers. The whole world changed.

James Smart helped us see that the functions were placed elsewhere, for better or worse. And now, we are seeing that the forms are changing too. Now, a very interesting dynamic begins to operate at this point. American mobility created the nuclear family. What does home, as a place, mean when one has lived in many cities? The place you were born, where you spent the biggest portion of time? With the exception of the fortunate few, most of us do not live close to grandparents, aunts, uncles - the truly traditional family. "Nuclear families are a new invention," Margaret Mead said, "and not a particularly good one." They cannot bear the weight we have placed on them. They need the reinforcing strength of the extended family, and in its absence, some supportive, loving community which becomes a family. A friend of mine, nearing retirement, is a grandfather whose grandchildren live hundreds of miles away. He told me he takes a walk before dinner - to talk to the neighborhood children. He told me that it's hard to be a grandfather and to have no grandchildren close enough to love.

It is the Festival of the Christian home throughout the Church today: the traditional Mother's Day with a broader scope. It is a time to recall that the one thing we all have in common is a genesis. We were brought into being by a miracle of strong love. We had a home. We had or have a mother and father and we carry, hidden deep in our hearts and minds and spirits, a rich treasure of love and formative nurture. That treasure is unique for each of us. And in its variety and particularity it is good to get in touch with it, celebrate it, give God thanks for it.

The faith, I find, is a strong resource for the task. The Bible, for instance, is refreshingly - almost embarrassingly - realistic about home and family. We may romanticize and sentimentalize the nuclear family, but the Judeo-Christian tradition doesn't. The motif gets off to a rocky start. Cain murders Abel practically on the first page. Noah's sons discover him in a drunken stupor. Abraham loans Sarah to Pharaoh for awhile to save his own skin. Jacob deceives his father, cheats his brother and plays his parents off against each other.

The Bible affirms the centrality of the home and family as the context for the human story to be told. But it does not oversimplify it, nor does it romanticize. In fact, the family and home in the Bible are portrayed honestly, faithfully and humanly.

Third, and this too is a gift from Martin Marty, to act Christianly is to carry the signs of hope, always. We are in the season of Resurrection. We live in the refracted light of an event so large it, above all events, defies simple description. Death did not defeat Jesus Christ. The powers of death were no match for Christ. Fundamental issues are now resolved. We are safe and free and the whole world is full of possibility because of the resurrection. We are the people, someone said, who sing at funerals. We are the people who will never give up on the world, who will be found working for improvement against all the odds, laboring when everyone else has gone to the party. To act as a Christian is to be constantly a sign of hope. Those without hope, the cynics, the ones who have given up on the world, feel no compulsion to work at much of anything except their own amusement. Ghandi was wrong, someone told me recently. "Those people over there will always be poor, dependent and violent and the sooner we forget the romantic nonsense about freedom and nonviolence the better." I prefer Martin Luther on the subject of hope. He said, "If they told me the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant a cherry tree."

Christian hope is not starry-eyed naivete. In fact, it confronts the simple truth that at this moment in history, things are not going well for our side. Freedom and justice and peace are not, at this moment, on the rise. Quite to the contrary. Christian hope doesn't oversimplify and doesn't overstate its own success potential. It stays, firmly, in the struggle - because it has its roots in Jesus Christ, who was dead but is risen.

How to act as a Christian? Somewhere before the strategy is devised there is a basic matter to be confronted. At some point in our pilgrimage we have to decide that it is important to us - perhaps the most important thing for us to take care of. At some point we have to see that our salvation, our wholeness, our integrity as a person depends on how we answer that question.

Walter Wink, an innovative New Testament scholar, was asked recently about his own faith pilgrimage. He said something important in response. "For the first forty years or so the burning question is, 'What is the meaning of my life?' We struggle with it and against, we read, pray and agonize over it. And then in the middle years the burning question changes. Instead of 'What does my life mean?' - it becomes - 'How, with the time remaining, can I make a difference?'"

I suppose we never totally lose the expectation that someday we will know, intellectually, all we need to know about life, death, God: and when we have that down, then we will know what to do about it. I have a hunch that we will wait a very long time; and that our wait will end when we either sell out to someone's simplified version of the Gospel, or simply give up on the whole enterprise.

There is another option, however. Jesus said, "The deeds I do in my father's name are my credentials." Your faith and mine; the faith of the individuals we have ordained and installed to office this morning, is authenticated as it takes shape in deeds: acts of moral intensity, of civility and tolerance for all our brothers and sisters: individual and corporate acts of tenacious, unrelenting hope for the world.

There is a sense in which this dynamic is what is happening in the text for the day. The setting is the Temple in Jerusalem, at the feast of Dedication which celebrated the liberating and cleansing of the Temple by Judas Maccabeus two centuries earlier. We know the feast by the name Hannukah. It was December. Jesus was walking in the covered portico inside the Temple wall when he was approached by a group of people who said: "How long must you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah say so plainly." It was probably an attempt to trap him: to trick him into a statement which later could be used as evidence of the crime of blasphemy. In fact, that is what happens in the next paragraph. At the very least it was an ill-advised effort to persuade Jesus to simplify a question which was very complex. Clearly, he and they differed regarding the definition of Messiah. If he had said, simply, "I am the Messiah" he would have spent the rest of the afternoon defining what the word did and did not mean.

Now this text is often used as a launching pad for homilies on the necessity for being simple, straightforward, and understandable in our articulation of the faith. It is a good point and the sermons are good. Unfortunately it is not consistent with what happens next. Jesus, in fact, doesn't tell them plainly. What he says is, "I have told you but you do not believe." What he had told them was that he was the good shepherd, and while the shepherd figure is loaded with Messianic content, it is not synonymous with Messiah. Instead of simplifying the issue in the way they wanted, he pointed off in a different direction: "My deeds done in my father's name are my credentials" is the way the New English Bible translates it.

The point is the deed, the act, the behavioral communication. The point, I take it, is that there are some things in this life which cannot be pinned down in simple, one-word answers; some things which are only affirmed, defined and expressed in action. Unless you are marvelously poetic, you cannot put into words your love for a dear one. I love the vignette about the ballerina who was asked what she was trying to say in a particlar dance. "If I could say it, I wouldn't have to dance," she replied.

It is wrong, and dangerous sometimes, to oversimplify and miss the complexity. I was in a discussion recently in which it was maintained that any young person in this country who can't read doesn't want to read. That's an oversimplification. That misses the complex reality of Daryl, 12, whose mother works, whose father is gone, whose only positive reinforcement - only good feelings about himself - come when his buddies cheer him on for knocking out the parking lot lights at Broad Street Church. It's an oversimplification to say Daryl doesn't want to read...and our refusal to deal with his complexity may make us feel good and principalled and righteous - and we will have Daryl on our hands for the next sixty years. It may be emotionally satisfying to see every liberation movement in Central America, or the world, every effort to establish justice, every organization dedicated to the improvement of life for the poor, as part of a Soviet conspiracy...But it is wrong and tragic. Nothing is ever gained by oversimplifying that which is complex.

Hans Kung somewhere quips that the list of great people who love Jesus but want nothing to do with the church would be long and distinguished indeed. And everyone on it has missed the point. You can't love Jesus without feeding the sheep, and that gets you mixed up with other folk and before you know it you're in church. to B.

I think Peter was in love with Jesus because he had seen Jesus live like that. Even as Jesus was pulling it out of him I believe Peter was recalling all those instances when love became visible, tangible, physical: when Jesus, moved by compassion had healed his own mother-in-law; when he gently touched little children; and ate with unclean street people; and in hot anger overturned tables and drove moneychangers from the temple; and when in awful majesty at the end knelt in front of each of them and washed their feet.

More than any of them I see in Peter my own attraction to the power of that kind of love. The allure has always been a love which has integrity and authenticity and strength about it. But there is a sense in which that strength also repels. How else can we account for the prissy Jesus of much ecclesiastical art? Robert Clyde Johnson's classic comment was that the Jesus of modern Protestantism is inclined to be "velvety" - that in modern hands the Jesus of the New Testament has a "soft streak" in his personality when, in fact, there is a profound strength which some found - and find - frightening.

Frederick Nitzsche, certainly no friend of the faith, saw this clearly in Jesus. A character in one of his novels says about Jesus, "He had to die: he looked with eyes that beheld everything - he beheld man's depths and dregs, all his hidden ignominy and ugliness." (Thus Spoke Zarathustra, in Johnson, "The Meaning of Christ", p. 33)

The allure of Jesus is a strength of a love that can also repel. After all, falling in love is very risky business. To be in love is somehow to be more alive - and that can be frightening. To be in love with one person is to love humanity more: it is to experience more, sense more, care more and hurt more. If you do not want that, if you do not want your life changed, it is better not to get close to Jesus. The allure, finally, is that he defines our humanity better than anybody else. Better than anyone he shows us what human life can be and therefore what our own potential is.

Sittler confessed to the seminary graduates, "This grave man with all the pathos and the magnificence of his life must not be betrayed. I must not talk nonsense about this man, I must not make jokes about him. I must not trivialize moralistically this awesome figure."

whatever he writes. So I read anxiously what Sittler, ~~in his late 70's~~, ~~world-class thinker~~, had to say to new seminary graduates. He posed the question of how Christianity gets transmitted from one person to another, one generation to the next. Listen to how he put it - "As I tried to discern the tangled history of my own coming to Christian faith...My whole life has been haunted by the reality of Jesus...I find that, despite all the scholarship which has taken place between my seminary days and this moment, there is no abatement in the power of this haunting allure of the figure of Jesus." (Trinity Review, Fall 1982, p. 34)

Sittler told how he had been on a program with Krister Stendahl, one of the leading New Testament scholars in the world, and how a layman from Iowa had gotten up during the question and answer period and asked very simply, "Professor Stendahl, how did you get 'hooked' on this stuff?" Again, let's allow Sittler to tell it: "Now we all leaned back and expected from Stendahl a fairly long-haired description of the historical, conceptual, philosophical path by which many of us came, and it was a great moment when Stendahl said, 'My family and I were not church people at all and the only way I could rebel against the mores of my family was to go to church! And when I got to church, within six months, I fell in love with Jesus.'" (p. 33/34)

Even those intellectuals who perceive and discern and comprehend so much more than the rest of us begin here, with the elemental simplicity of the man. Or perhaps it is because they discern so much that they can see the centrality of the man..."I fell in love with Jesus."

Do you remember

#2 The question is posed first in the lesson for the day, by Jesus himself. "Do you love me, Peter?" The situation is loaded with dramatic intensity. On the night Jesus was arrested and subjected to the humiliation of a religious trial before Caiaphas, Peter had followed at a safe distance into the courtyard of the high priest's residence. It was there, warming himself at the fire, that Peter had been challenged. "You are one of them!" a young woman had said. And Peter, startled, frightened, had denied it. Three times it happened that night and each time Peter denied knowing Jesus, punctuating his third denial with an obscenity. It is one of the more poignantly human stories in the Gospel narrative, and it concludes powerfully with the cock crowing and Jesus' eyes meeting Peter's and Peter weeping bitterly, devastated by his own humanness.

What occurred next, for Peter, is unclear. Jesus was crucified on a Friday. If the disciples were around, most of them at least, kept a discreet distance. On the first day of the week,, Easter Sunday, Peter was one of the first to discover the empty tomb. And then there occurred a series of mysterious resurrection appearances. Some time later Peter and the others are fishing in the early morning when the risen Christ appears on the shore. They eat breakfast together and ~~the structure of the text suggests that~~ the stage is set for the conclusion of the matter of Peter's denial.

> and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him. (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32)

In both these brief passages from Mark, our earliest gospel, Jesus had been teaching the Twelve about his death and rising again after three days. How did the disciples react? They were embarrassingly dense. In the first passage, Peter took Jesus aside and began to scold him for talking in such a manner. Peter thought the whole thing wass outlandish, way-out crazy talk. In the second passage, the disciples' reaction was complete bewilderment. It reads: "They did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him." They thought Jesus had gone off the deep end.

In fact, our evidence is unanimous in saying in a wide variety of ways that the disciples had no expectation of the Resurrection whatsoever. There was nothing in their background to prepare them for such a thing. Take the Bible of their day. In the entire Old Testament there is no accepted idea of resurrection except as a part of a general resurrection at the last day, at Judgment Day. Any idea of resurrection during the course of history instead of simply at the end of history, any idea of an individual resurrection, was a completely foreign and unacceptable concept.

The fact is the disciples were far from being pre-conditioned to expect such a thing. They were highly skeptical and then quite dumbfounded. And yet in the end they were firmly convinced that Christ was resurrected. What caused their about-face? According to all our accounts, it was the appearances of Jesus which were decisive for the disciples' faith. Except for Mark, whose ending has been lost, all the accounts tell of Christ's appearing to the disciples after his death. Eleven different appearances are reported. There are discrepancies between the accounts as might be expected in such an emotionally charged situation, especially when the earliest writers were reconstructing an event of twenty or more years before.

However, the accounts are unanimous at least in this much: The appearances came to those already trying to believe in the Christ. They were not public miracles. The appearances were faith assurances, not proof to compel faith.

About the different locations of the appearances - some accounts say in Jerusalem and some say in Galilee. Perhaps it is as simple as this: Jesus appeared to his followers wherever they happened to be. We know they were first in Jerusalem, then traveled to Galilee out of fear of arrest, and that they later returned to Jerusalem.

Whenever I set out to work through some basic Christian idea, I am guided by three principles:

The first is my understanding that religion is really the search for and the practice of basic truth. Religion is not a set of pious platitudes, not a scheme to sugar-coat reality and make the harshness of life easier to swallow. Real religion is our deepest approach to the truth which is basic to life, the truth which supports life itself. That truth is God.

The second basic principle is this: God has given us minds to use as fully as we are capable. We certainly will never know all the truth, for we are human and limited, but it is our responsibility to work constantly to understand truth more completely. God intends us to.

The third basic principle of my search for religious truth is this: Truth, if it really is truth, cannot be diminished by honest questioning and probing. It only shines through more brightly as the debris of misunderstanding is swept away. Therefore, no aspect of faith should be withheld from our critical investigation on the excuse that "it is too sacred". The only justifiable reason for calling something sacred is that it is so very true. So, what is really sacred will only benefit from honest questioning.

Concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then, I read the accounts with those three principles in mind. The story is told in the four gospels and the writings of Paul. Those are the original sources.

We would expect such an important event to be accurately described by those who considered it the most significant experience in all history. But even a quick reading reveals obvious inconsistencies in the biblical accounts. Take just two obvious test questions.

First, to whom did the Risen Lord appear? Paul does not even mention his appearance to the women leaving the tomb as Matthew describes it. Only Paul says there was a separate appearance to James and only he and Luke mention Jesus' appearing first to Peter. There is, in addition, about equal division over whether the resurrection appearances took place in Galilee or in Jerusalem.

A second test question: What about the ascension of Jesus, his rising into heaven? Paul and Mark say nothing about it at all and only Luke clearly describes such an occurrence. Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road happened at least two years and perhaps nine years after the crucifixion, which hardly fits into the traditional idea of forty days from Easter to ascension.

There are other questions we might ask about obvious inconsistencies, but let these examples serve our purpose today.

"O death, where is thy victory?" Paul asked for all of us. And then instead of the final, irrefutable proof: at that very moment when we are up on the edge of our seats, squinting to see better, cupping our ears to hear it all..this is what he says: "Therefore, beloved...be steadfast, immovable..."

The deepest meaning of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is affirmed, not in eloquent argument, nor in irrefutable proof, but in human lives which are now different, lives described as steadfast, immovable. That is what Paul wanted his Corinthian friends to know; and that, I propose, is the word of God for us this day. Your life and mine can be different because of the event and the reality we celebrate today.

A battle has been won. We have not watched a mythical deity transcend the dirt and sweat of humanity to repose in celestral glory. We have watched, horrified, as God lived within his creation: taking on our humanity. We have watched as our humanity was embraced and affirmed in that man's life; even the occasional senselessness of it, even the unfairness and cruelty and meaningless suffering. We have seen all of it gathered into the strong embrace of a Lord who became one of us. And so our religion happens, not only in our mind and, certainly not in cloistered safety, but right in the middle of it all, on the calvaries of this world if need be.

Fear, for instance, has no more substance. There is no darkness into which our Lord God has not walked. And hatred has been shown for what it is, and love - no longer the sweet sentimentality of the placid - but now, because he lives, the victorious activity of God and all God's children.

And integrity and justice and kindness are shown this day to be the foundations upon which God's creations rests, groaning in the travail to be borne, and yet there, solidly, eternally.

Of course crucifixion is real. Of course suffering and injustice and sickness and cruelty are real. Of course we will die one day and death is real. But these are not the final reality. Because Jesus Christ is risen, the rules have been changed. And life and hope and joy are not seen celebrated as the truth about the creation, and we know that because he lives, we shall live also.

The world needs to know that - today. The world needs to know that love and life are final realities and that their struggle is never in vain. You and I need that Easter promise, as we need food and drink. The reason is that we know a little bit about the struggle. We know about death - and the kind of world which resulted in a crucifixion.

For some of us it is a life-long series of skirmishes. For others, life is a sequence of major battles. For some, it is the requirement to find strength to go on loving and caring and forgiving in the middle of deep and desparate hurt. For some, it is the inclination to throw in the spiritual towel, to accept the end of a dream and to stop wasting emotional energy tilting with windmills that are not as visible as they once were. For some, it is the relentless, gnawing pain of alcholism and the relentless inclination to give up. For some, the end of a rela-

We catch our breath, when a dear one, dying, squeezes our hand, and comforts us, the living, and says, "It will be all right. Everything is going to be all right." We are stunned by the resurrection when we encounter it in life. And the truth is, that life is the only place it has ever been seen: the life of the world which strangely, mysteriously bears it as a blessed secret; the life of believers who have decided to live as if it were true; and, yes, our own lives - even ours - on those occasions when we have felt, fleetingly, its power.

Martin Marty wrote an essay for Jewish friends several Easters ago. It is a favorite of mine. He said: "Yawn, please, whenever a preacher tries to 'prove' the resurrection. Your boredom will help us face the issue of faith. Silly putty proofs and reasonings insult you and thoughtful Christians. They convince only the convinced. Nervous apologists have to use logic and history to prove that a tomb was empty. But Easter rises from the experience of faith - then and now."

The Bible doesn't spend much time arguing the case. The four Gospels are literary and historical disasters when it comes to describing the resurrection. Paranthentically, I have always thought one of the more persuasive arguments for the authenticity of the Biblical record is that the writers and editors had every opportunity to polish these four accounts so that they would conform with one another. But they didn't do it. They let the accounts stand as they are. "The New Testament babbles about the resurrection", someone wrote recently. There are major discrepencies in the narratives: different characters are running back and forth, literally bumping into one another; mistaking identities, stumbling around in the dark whispering, some speechless with fright, others sensibly doubting it, still others obviously untouched by it, heading out for dinner in the next town. It takes weeks, months, years, for the people on the spot to assimilate what happened, even to begin to understand it. Most, I have to conclude, never did develop an adequate theology of resurrection. What they most certainly did, however, is live differently, confidently, victoriously, intentionally, immovably because of the power of the resurrection.

St. Paul was a Pharisee. That means lawyer and that means he could not resist having a go at the argument. Unlike the Gospels with their embarrassingly human accounting, Paul presents the academic assertion of the resurrection to his friends in the Corinthian church who were rather skeptical, and then argues, vigoriously, for its truth. The 15th chapter of First Corinthians is classic. Paul marshalls every polemic resource at his disposal and prosecutes the case:

- if there is no resurrection, Christ is not raised,
- as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive,
- what you sow does not come to life unless it dies...etc., etc. ad infinitum.

And then, as his argument winds down, Paul becomes, first an artist. "Lo! I tell you a mystery...O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? Thanks be to God..." That's music, poetry, art. The argument is over for Paul. It is time for the singing. Second, Paul becomes a behaviorist. "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory... therefore, my beloved...be steadfast, immovable..."

do my thing and you do yours and let's not get in each others way" was the new social contract a few years ago. Self discovery, self affirmation, self assertion became a plague of simple selfishness in which doing only what one wants to do looked like strength and freedom. But that badly misses something precious about our humanity, our potential as persons, and it flies squarely in the face of the only ethical wisdom we Christians have, namely the obligation, the requirement, the necessity of love.

We do not codify our morality. We do not attach conditions to God's love and make salvation dependent on the basis of the rules we have kept. "Be good and God will reward you." is the oldest but most persistent theological mistake in the book. Goodness is its own reward. God already loves you - is how it is in Christian faith, and Paul fought the battle early. The heresy is durable, however. And so we need reminding. We are saved by grace and we are free to the degree that we commit ourselves in love to the service of others.

"Love, and do as you please" is how Augustine, 4th century Bishop in North Africa, said it. As a young man he had struggled with how to reconcile what he wanted to do with what religion told him he had to do. He indulged his appetites, lived as a libertine, sank deeper and deeper into meaninglessness, returned to the faith - and saw that all he was doing was submitting to a different kind of bondage. In his Confessions he put it memorably: "Love, and Do as You Please". St. Augustine saw it clearly: Christian freedom is proscribed, hemmed in on all sides by love.

It certainly isn't easy: it surely is not permissiveness. In fact it is much more strenuous to live by the necessity to love - than simply to follow the rules.

It is not easy to know how to live as a Christian. The issues with which we must deal are difficult, and the futurists are promising that the complexity will increase. "Pro Choice - Pro Life" on the abortion question almost pales by comparison with the ethical choices future generations will make about genetic engineering, for instance. Simple rules will not be helpful.

What will be helpful is the idea of Christian freedom: a freedom that does not exist in the abstract, but which literally comes into being when combined with the discipline of obligation, loyalty, commitment, and love.

One of the wisest teachers I ever had was Joseph Sittler, Professor of Theology, University of Chicago. In a book of essays published on his 75th birthday, he commented on the relationship of freedom and obligation, particularly in the context of human relations.

> "Bach produced greatness within the strict musical limits of his time: indeed the severity of the limits called forth the magnificence of the accomplishment. Just as Bach accepted limitation and discipline in musical composition, so marriage means limits. Without limitation there is no expansion...The trouble with temporary relationships is that when there is a way out, the couple deprive themselves of the deepening effect of going all the way in...

persuade God to be gracious - are empty, meaningless, a waste of time and energy. There are no conditions, no more bills to be paid, no more obligations to be fulfilled to convince God to love. Jesus Christ has taken care of all that. What remains, Paul said, is to hear that incredible bit of news, really to hear it, to be converted by it in fact, from a person worrying about pleasing God to one who is overwhelmed by joy and because he knows that God is pleased. What remains is to hear that in a way that allows it to generate some related behavior - love, joy, peace, patience. There aren't any rules about this behavior, Paul said.

Now, in any age, it is very good news to hear that God has given you your salvation - you are safe. And as soon as these Galatian Gentiles began to appropriate it and enjoy it a bit, they were visited by teams of teachers from Jerusalem, dispatched by the church - which was strongly Jewish - to follow Paul and to tell the new Gentile believers that in order truly to be a disciple of Jesus Christ a person had first to conform to the law of Moses. When some of the new Galatian Christians, men and women with whom Paul lived and worked and came to love very much, became confused: when some tried to adapt to the dietary and Sabbath regulations and submitted to circumcision, Paul wrote a blistering letter which is angry and at times vindictive. "I wish those who were confusing you would mutilate themselves..." he wrote, and that is a polite translation of what Paul actually said he hoped these earnest people would do to themselves. The letter is magnificent: it is the cornerstone of the idea of Christian freedom. It was the foundation of the Protestant Reformation and it has spoken to the millions upon millions of Christian men and women who have heard the good news in political or economic bondage and in those circumstances have learned the meaning of freedom. It has spoken to millions of Christians living with a heavy load of personal guilt, unable ever to do enough to create for themselves a blessed sense of forgiveness, redemption. It has been salvation for many.

But there is another side to this matter, and Paul gets to it near the end of the letter. "You were called to freedom...only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another." How in the world can you be free and a servant at the same time? What does it mean to be free if you can't do what you want to do?

Some of the Galatians and their cousins over in Corinth particularly, heard the Gospel of freedom as permission to do whatever they wanted to do. "Hurray!" they said. "If God isn't going to love us any more for obeying the rules, why bother? Let's do our own thing!" And they did. In the name of Christian freedom they lived it up. Over in Corinth they drank too much communion wine and turned the sacrament of the Lord's Supper into an orgy. "Why now? God still loves us. Paul said so - they reasoned, with some logic.

Something important is missing from that argument, obviously. Freedom may be that which makes us human: it may be the differentiation between human beings who can decide what to do and animals who simply answer hormones and instincts. But raw freedom - pure freedom - the simple absence of necessity not only isn't the point in a Christian sense, it has a way of becoming anarchy, in the final analysis seems to give rise to a new kind of bondage.

Christianity suggests to each of us that the pain we experience from guilt is answered by a God who loves us and accepts us and forgives us. We have trouble with that most of the time. Mostly we are more comfortable with a religion based on fair value. "We don't like hearing that we are saved by grace." Karl Barth wrote. "We do not appreciate that God does not owe us anything, that we are bound to live from his goodness alone." (Deliverance to the Captives, p. 40) And so we have trouble accepting and receiving what we need most. And there is a very real sense that the more intense our need for grace, the more difficulty we have with it. And there is a sense in which all the theological rhetoric in the world probably isn't going to convince us that God loves us if we feel unloved, unlovable, and guilty.

And so, let's come at it from the human perspective. At our best, we know that guilt is not healthy as a permanent condition, that people can be manipulated and made to do what they don't particularly want to do by exploitation of guilt. We know, however, that if guilt is the motive there will be no integrity and no authenticity and no joy to it, whatever it is, from preparing meals to going to church.

In fact we do learn that people are motivated more by positive reinforcement, by confidence and compliment and affection. Even though we still do it on occasion, we know that a child isn't motivated to be smarter by calling him stupid: nor will he be trustworthy for having been called a liar; nor will he work hard as a result of being called lazy. In marriage, faithfulness is not particularly enhanced by the fear of what will happen if you get caught being unfaithful, but by a love given to you which is so precious it would break your own heart to betray it.

So it is that Christianity begins with the love of God. Love for neighbor, justice and kindness and generosity occur in life not out of fear or guilt - but out of the acknowledgment of God's love. Even confession occurs for the Christian not out of guilt primarily, certainly not out of a sense that something terrible is going to happen if we don't confess, but ultimately because we know we are loved.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the unlikely good news that the God who knows our past, loves us in spite of it. It is the improbable but liberating news that God knows all there is to know about us now - and loves us still. The freedom comes in when we shift to future tense. He is going to continue loving us whatever is ahead, whatever we chose to do in the future.

Karl Barth, capable of the most complex philosophic argument, said this simply and well..."Grace is the beginning of the true life of freedom, of a carefree heart, of joy deep within, of love of God and neighbor, of great and assurred hope." (op. cit., p. 40)

The Good News - the best of all news - is that the first and the last word about it is a word of love: God's love: truly a grace that is amazing! Amen.

"A man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ," he wrote. "I died to the law that I might live to God," he claimed. "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me," is the way he tried to explain what a person does who no longer practices religion as a set of rules.

Something very important about our humanity, and about Christian relevance, emerges from Paul's insight here. A religion based on grace is freeing, life-giving, nurturing, inclusive, loving. A religion based on keeping a set of rules, however admirable, becomes an end in itself, a demarcation line between the good people who keep the rules and the bad people who either don't know what the rules are or who chose to ignore them. A religion of rules is a never-ending process of trying harder and harder to live up to someone else's expectations, one's parents, the religious authorities, or God, and the only guaranteed product of that kind of religion is guilt. Who, after all, can ever do enough good, and obey enough rules to guarantee that God will be pleased.

Matters of love and freedom and guilt are very near the heart of our humanity. "Amazing Grace. How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." got itself a position in the charts and became a piece of America, not because it is good music, but precisely because it's relevant theology. People who wouldn't be caught dead going to church and reciting creeds, nevertheless know exactly what it means.

Time Magazine ran a feature article several weeks ago on British actor Dudley Moore. Moore is 5'2" with a minor physical defect and a sky-rocketing career. Time reports, however, that he "spent seventeen years in the offices of one shrink or another trying to come to terms with his childhood." He says: "Psychologically it was made more harrowing by the fact that my parents felt guilty about it. That made me feel as if I had done something wrong...I'm not grim, but I'm still basically cringing." I read in that a little more than superficial Hollywood psychology. I read, rather, a strikingly human expression of the incredible human vulnerability to guilt and power of guilt to shape and influence human beings all their lives.

The importance of what Paul wrote to the Galatians is the insight that religion sometimes exploits that vulnerability and actually traffics in guilt. My first exposure to the subject came in a class taught by a distinguished Chicago Psychiatrist. "You Christians play psychological blackmail with people" he told a startled group of theological students. "First, you tell them they are sinners by nature; unacceptable to God, to other good people and, obviously to themselves if they think about it much. You tell them they were born that way. and when you've got them feeling sufficiently guilty you offer yourselves and your churches as the only way to relieve a little of that guilt."

He didn't have it quite right, of course. But I certainly never forgot what he said. A lot of Christianity does exploit the inherent power of guilt. A lot of religion is manipulative and demeaning and guilt-producing. A lot of religion deserves what the psychiatrist said about it.

It is there for all of us: both the prison and the liberator God. It may not be cast in the same mold as the debate in Galatians, but for all of us there is the temptation to relinquish the freedom to think, to consider all the options, to examine critically all the alternatives, in favor of someone's tight system which tells us how to think and makes our freedom obsolete.

It is there for all of us: a prison cell - a yoke. We may be in the prison of our own professional expectations, or the expectations of others. It may be the heavy yoke of guilt because we don't measure up. We don't square with a whole litany of expectations about our parenting, homemaking, income level, and sex appeal; and we've been carrying all of it around since childhood. It may be a yoke of guilt because we have been less than we could be, we have been untrue to some high ideal. It may be the prison of fear: fear of failure, fear of sickness, fear of feeling foolish, fear of death. it may be the prison of compulsiveness that dictates every waking moment and which drives us every day of our lives. It may, very simply, be that familiar dynamic of our inability to accept that we are freely loved by our God. That's at the heart of it all somehow.

The glorious Good News of the Gospel; the essence of Christianity, is that we are loved by God, freely. God loves us - in Jesus Christ he has shown us.

And the only way to deal with that is to rejoice in it and affirm it and live it.

Charles Peguy has it right, I think, in a poem which is my favorite:

"When you have once known what it is to be loved freely
Submission no longer has any taste.
All the prostrations in the world
Are not worth the beautiful upright attitude of a free man as
he kneels.
All the submissions, all the dejection in the world
Are not equal in value to the soaring up point,
The beautiful straight soaring up of one single invocation
From a love that is free."

For freedom has set us free. AMEN.

God eternal, we are too willing to be less than you created us to be. Forgive us for that. Give us strength to embrace and to live responsibly the freedom you give, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Obviously there is a Christian stake in all of this. That ringing phrase, by the way, comes from St. Paul's letter to the Christian churches in Galatia. It comes as the introduction to a paragraph which seems to be about circumcision, of all things, a passage which makes some people blush, others snicker, and everybody uncomfortable. But it really is about freedom. Let's look.

Jesus was a Jew. His disciples were Jews. The earliest church was Jewish. the earliest Christians met in Synagogues and it never occurred to them that they were anything other than Jewish. Jesus had said that his purpose was to fulfill, not destroy, the law of Judaism. That law included some 613 rules, based essentially on the Ten Commandments, which gave order to, and regulated, all of life. It defined how human life was to be lived. it is a magnificent thing - the Torah. It is the reason Jews remained Jews; it is why there is an Israel today. It is the way a person lives a righteous and holy life. It is not there intrinsically, but gradually keeping the law came to be seen as the way a person earned God's approval, or love, or salvation. "Be good, obey the law, follow the rule, and God will love you." It's the oldest and most logical heresy in history. Now, there isn't much of an issue here so long as Christianity saw itself as part of Judaism.

Early on in the story, however, a man by the name of Paul, a Jew, a Pharisee in fact, decided to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ up into Asia Minor, to some distinctly unJewish or Gentile people. It is called Turkey today, and the people Paul met in those Galatian cities were singularly uninterested in dietary laws and Sabbath restrictions. And so Paul started where they were, and told them about Jesus of Nazareth, God's son, and the new life available to them because God loved them. And the record shows that Paul was good enough preacher to put it in words and intellectual constructs which were meaningful to them. And when some of them were persuaded that Paul was telling the truth, he baptized them, and introduced them to one another and told them to stick together because they were now a special community called a church: men and women, slaves and free people, rich and poor, Jews and Greeks.

The issue of freedom emerged when the Christians back in Jerusalem, who thought of themselves in Judaic terms, heard what Paul had done. They were aghast, scandalized. Paul was a liberal, a compromiser, willing to delete anything which offended anybody. And they became so concerned and upset that they dispatched teams to travel to all those Gentile cities where Paul had been and correct the error which had been committed. "Friends", they said, "there has been a small mistake. Paul may have told you that all you had to do to be a Christian was believe in Jesus Christ. Well, it's not quite that simple. As a matter of fact, if you want to be a Christian you have to be a Jew first. You will have to abide by this law. And if you are a man you will have to undergo the rite of circumcision."

You can imagine how that went over. Some quit on the spot, and went back to happy paganism. Some did nothing but worried a lot. Others looked up the Mosaic law and began, furiously, to try to abide by it. It was a chaotic situation - heartbreaking to the man who loved all these people and wanted them to prosper and to enjoy their new faith.

potential includes appliances that are wearing out, children growing up and away from us, jobs that look a little less permanent and a lot less satisfying than they used to, the loss of a good overhead smash and the universal dynamic described gently as "the aging process". Sometimes the litany of the future sounds so frightening that we reach, intentionally into the past to hold on a bit longer. Sometimes we try to parent too long, or hit the ball too hard, or drink too much, or have an affair which will help us recover what we think we must be to affirm that we are alive.

The future is, for all of us, only partially unknown. Some of us will have to cope with major life crises. Some of us will have to change our life styles: all of us must live through whatever future is given to us.

The good news is that God's own son has come among us and lived through his own future with determination and faithfulness and hope. The good news of Jesus Christ is that the very worst the future could do, did not end his father's love: for him, nor even his own life. The good news of the gospel is always, incredibly - a word of hope about the future.

Because of the incarnation - God loving this world so much that he came to live in it: and because of resurrection - the life of God so strong that death does not defeat it, Christianity is always hopelessly in love with the present and hopelessly optimistic about the future.

The Christ of the New Testament will not allow his disciples to build a monument on the mountain side: will not allow Peter to stay up there away from the crowd; will not, that is to say, allow his people to cling to the past.

The Christ whose name we claim - calls us - as church - as people - to follow him down into the future.

My favorite metaphor for God uses the future tense. God is not only God of the past, but the God of the future. God is not only the father of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus - he is father of my children and their children and their children and of countless generations ahead. God creates, I love to remind myself - not as a push from behind, but as a pull from ahead.

Of course there are obstacles. Of course they look like giants sometimes. But what a mistake to try to return to the safety of the past. What a mistake to conclude that compared to those problems up there, we're nothing more than grasshoppers. God is up there, too - in that future. He calls us into it - as nation - as church - as men and women: to live with joyful obedience - which means hope. AMEN.

He is echoed by John Naisbitt in the book everyone is talking about, Megatrends. Having defined and illustrated the ten major trends which are already radically changing our life, Naisbitt adds an intriguing postscript:

> "We are living in the time of the parenthesis," he says, "the time between eras. It is though we have bracketed off the present from both the past and future, for we are neither here nor there. We have not left behind the America of the past.....But we have not embraced the future either. We have done the human thing; we are clinging to the known past in fear of the unknown future..." (p. 249)

"There are giants up ahead", the Israelite spies reported. "They're so big, we felt like grasshoppers." The story, in the 13th and 14th chapters of the Book of Numbers is marvelous. The tribes of Israel had finished three decades of wandering through the wilderness. Now they stood on the very border of Canaan, the promised land. Moses sent out a party of spies to survey this new place. They returned, after 40 days, having done their intelligence assignment thoroughly. They brought back samples of grapes and pomegranites and figs. They reported that the land was flowing with milk and honey. But there was something else in the land as well: some fortified cities and some very fierce-looking people. At the end of the initial report, Caleb, their spokesman, suggested that they get on with it; that they conquer the land. But the other spies offer a dissenting opinion. Now, the people of the land are not simply sturdy - "they are stronger than we are", besides "that country will swallow up anybody who tries to conquer it." And then, working up a real head of steam, "as a matter of fact, those people up there are giants - compared to them we're nothing but a bunch of grasshoppers." And the whole company spent the night worrying and wringing their hands and weeping. And they complained to Moses and Aaron, and said that, given a choice, they would rather die of old age in their beds in Egypt, even as slaves, than in this god-forsaken place. And they even started to talk about replacing Moses and Aaron with a leadership team which was a little more conservative, more realistic, one that knew that grasshoppers are no match for giants.

no just beginning

William Sloane Coffin, commenting on this story, says: "While love seeks truth, fear seeks safety. and fear distorts the truth, not by exaggerating the ills of the world (which would be difficult) but by underestimating our ability to deal with them." (p. 60, Courage to Love)

Well, there are obstacles up ahead and sometimes they look like giants. The lead article in the recent Futurist Magazine is "Do We Owe Anything to Future Generations?" It lists the issues with which this present generation of Americans must deal, if there is to be a future for our children's children: you know them by heart: energy, population, environment, etc. etc. Naisbitt asks - Do we have the courage - the innovative ability to venture forward into the future?

The President of Alma College told me recently that the new survey of freshman attitudes reveals general cynicism about the future. Unlike their predecessors, what freshmen want - this survey reveals - is not peace, an end to hunger, racial justice, or a better world - but a bigger piece of the financial pie. But the most disturbing thing of all, the President said, is that their parents are welcoming this general lowering of expectations, this end of idealism - with sighs of relief. The worst thing of all, he said, is that their parents regard the end of idealism as a good idea.

A modern historian, Robert McElvaine, says most history is written from the top down, not from the bottom up. His special concern is for the "forgotten people" of FDR's depression. McElvaine has set about to listen to these people through letters they had written to President Roosevelt and his wife. We can imagine hearing the same words from Cleveland or Detroit or Columbus.

One letter said rather eloquently, "Why does everything have exceptional value. Except the human being--why are we reduced to poverty and starving and anxiety and sorrow?"

A 12 year old boy writes FDR: "My father he staying home. An all the time crying because he can't find work. I told him why are you crying daddy, and daddy said why shouldn't I cry when there is nothing in the house." In contrast is the one who wrote Roosevelt saying, "Let each one paddle their own canoe, or sink."

The story of the healing of the epileptic is more significant when one considers the larger message. The incident is told to help explain the mystery of the passion story. Neither the disciples nor we can understand the words, "The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him and he will be raised on the third day."

The entire story of Jesus's passion, his journey to Jerusalem and the cross is in a sense a narrative about suffering. It is a story of blood, sweat, tears, personal denial and abandonment by those he loved best. After Jesus heals the boy he predicts his fateful end to his disciples. But we must not miss the significance of the epileptic boy. The passion story is also a story about love. To be compassionate--to be full of passion--is to view a suffering or deficient person as a cherished fellow human being. To heal, to free, to give sight to each particular individual was the larger task of Jesus. The story tells of a God who cares enough for each of us to enter our suffering.

We can remain caught in the questions of how a loving God could allow this suffering or why an all powerful God will allow evil in the world. But to do so, leads nowhere.

The life of Jesus Christ points to the answer. The discovery of Christ implies the discovery of the redeeming presence of God within the anguish of human experience. He tells of a God who cares passionately for each one who cries, "My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me," and each one who comes pleading, "Lord have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly."

Christian religion is not a turning from each other, but a turning toward each other. It is not a freeing from suffering, but a willingness to care for those who suffer. It is not enough for us to set back and smugly point to the seeming indifference of government bureaucracies. It is to become involved in the lives of those who line Long Street and Livingston Avenue. It is to see the loss of hope in their eyes and their hunger for healing. It is to take our faith which is as small as a mustard seed, and to become passionately concerned for those who suffer. It is not enough for us to say as did the disciples, "Why could we not cast it out?"

He goes on to suggest that God could have warned us of danger through ways other than pain. He suggests a doorbell to notify us, or neon tubes in the middle of the forehead. But what of a God who creates pain?

Humor, while necessary for comic relief in life, can't hide the human misery which suffering can bring. Elie Wiesel, young boy in Auschwitz, writes of his death camp experience in a memoir titled Night. With his discovery of evil and suffering he questions the possibility of the existence of God. He tells of one episode in horror:

"I witnessed other hangings. I never saw a single one of the victims weep. (But) to hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips.

"Three victims mounted together into the chairs. The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses. 'Long live liberty!' cried the two adults. But the child was silent. 'Where is God?' someone behind me asked. At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over. Total silence throughout the camp.

"Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. But the third rope was still moving: being so light the child was still alive. Behind me I heard the same man asking: 'Where is God now?' And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is He? Here He is--He is hanging here on this gallows...'"

Dorothy Soelle, a German theologian, asked whose side God was on in the concentration camps, the murderers side or the victims side? Soelle, in her book Suffering, suggests that "the most important question we can ask about suffering is whom it serves. Does our suffering serve good or evil, the cause of becoming alive or being morally paralyzed? Soelle's emphasis is not on "from where does suffering come," but on "where does it lead?"

The questions become more difficult. They move from identifying suffering as something "out there" - to our more personal response. If we ask, where does suffering lead, we must then ask ourselves, "why do we close our eyes and pretend we do not hear and see those who suffer? Can we even face our own suffering? When the aspiring writer in the movie Sophie's Choice begins to get to know the pain of Sophie and Nathan he says for all of us, "I longed to pack my bags and escape."

The disciples in the story of the epileptic responded rather typically to the tragic situations. They didn't seem to be in touch with what the father and son were experiencing. They hadn't made the hopeless rounds from doctor to doctor and medication to medication. They didn't live with the constant worry that the son would burn or drown himself. Instead they asked Jesus "Why couldn't we heal him?" Their concern was for themselves and their failing performance.

sufficient global power. For a moment, we needed no one. The day is long gone, but the mentality isn't. Naisbitt has written a good chapter on the World Economy in Megatrends which is very informative, particularly for those who see our economic future in terms of restoring the good old days of swashbuckling independence. We are no longer number one in terms of living standards, for instance. We trail Sweden, Denmark, West Germany, Switzerland. (p. 57) The economics of the nations of the world, in the meantime, are intimately related and very dependent on one another. For instance "Ford's world car, The Escort, is being put together in the United States, Britain, and Germany from parts made in Spain, Italy, Japan, and Brazil;.....90% of the baseball mitts used in the great American pasttime are made in Japan. But they are made from American cowhide, which is shipped to Brazil for tanning before it goes to Japan to be made into mitts." (p. 67)

The point is that in terms of the life of the whole world, the peace of the world, self-sufficiency is a liability and dependence on one another is an asset. Naisbitt suggests that the best hope for world peace is a thoroughly interdependent world economy.

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." The Gospel of Jesus Christ is tilted in the direction of the poor. And the reason is that the affluent seem to forget how to be human. Thus the historic flirtation with poverty as a moral good, in and of itself. St. Francis of Assissi demonstrated the sheer, unadultered potential of humanity apart from riches. And, of course, the monastic orders adopted vows of poverty which, it was assumed, was a holy and good thing to do. The Bible itself, is warmly and compassionately interested in poor people. Sometimes it is righteously angry at injustice and the exploitation of the poor by the rich. There is no getting away from that in the Bible. The Old Testament prophets railed against the gap between rich and poor and urged the whole nation to assume the burden for the care of one another. Jesus echoed that and there is a sense in which the whole Gospel story is told from the perspecstive of the poor, the weak, the social outcast. Not to understand that about Christianity is to miss something fundamental about the entire enterprise. To expect Christians not to care about economic justice in the Third World, simply because Marxist revolutionaries line up on the same side - is to exhibit an incredible naivete. One wishes the people at Reader's Digest would simply read the Bible and then call the folks over at "60 Minutes" and tell them what it says.

It is good news for the poor. It is not a prescription for social reorganization. Economic justice is not synonymous with the redistribution of wealth according to Marxist formula. But the Bible is concerned about poor people, and it celebrates some characteristics of poor people which wealthy people have a tendency to lose in the process of becoming wealthy.

Simplicity, for instance: the ability to be happy, within oneself, instead of as a result of owning things: a sense of one's humanness, one's potential and gifts as well as one's limits: and, above all, a sharpened sense of interdependence, a willingness to acknowledge and celebrate the fact that people need people in order to be human - and happy: that to be wealthy and alone is to be very, very poor.

have suggested - he translates "poor:" into "poor in spirit". In any event, it seems fair to conclude that Jesus did not reject wealthy people simply because they were wealthy. Yet he clearly seemed to have a preference for poverty, for poor people. He spent most of his life among them. They, in his way of seeing things, are the blessed - the truly happy - which is what the Greek word means. The poor, throughout the Bible are God's favorites. And determining the reason why is a scholarly project of long duration.

"The poor people heard him gladly", the New Testament says. What he said was good news for them. He was one of them. Some have suggested that Jesus preferred poverty because it was his own experience. His home was poor: his parents and their friends were poor. Historians point out that with the exception of the elite, all the people of the world at the time of Christ, spent nearly all their time working on the basic problems of survival: food, shelter, and clothing. And so, while he seemed comfortable enough with people of all stations, Jesus knew personally, what it meant to be poor.

More to the point, scholars suggest that Jesus' affection for the poor, came from the attitudes, the world view, which always seems to accrue to the not-poor the affluent. Walter Russell Bowie, commenting on this passage years ago wrote: "He never condemned wealth as such, but he saw how wealth might encase men in a hard shell of their seeming sufficiency so that they were no longer sensitive to the spiritual values of life." (Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 8, p. 117)

Self-sufficiency, the sense that one needs no-one, is near the heart of the matter here. And nowhere is that subject more eloquently explored than in those marvelous New Yorker cartoons: gently puncturing the self-sufficient posturing of the affluent: the cigar chomping tycoon surveying his vast manufacturing plant from his elegant office window, and saying something like "you may not be able to serve God and mammon but it doesn't hurt to have a little back for a rainy day."; the chairman of the board, presiding in front of a dismal sales chart and saying "All in favor of a stiff upper lip say Aye." It's not wealth that is evil: it is the attitude toward life which it seems to foster. I was delighted to discover a quotation from Martin Luther - 450 years old. He wrote: "Rich folk's children seldom turn out right. They are complacent, arrogant, and conceited, and think they need to learn nothing because they think they have enough to live on." (ibid.) Theology, philosophy, sociology have always understood that self-sufficiency can be the enemy of human relations.

The futurists, interestingly, are warning us that we have elevated the idea of self-sufficiency and personal independence to the level of religious truth and that it will do us in if we do not alter it. That will not be easy because the self-sufficient, totally independent, lone individual, needing no one, has always been a kind of ideal for us. And the dream of a nation, totally independent, totally self-sufficient, while true for us for a brief time, is not true now and never will be true again.

And then, you begin to see the mystery in it all, and the fact that we are not talking about great skill and accomplishment. We are simply affirming that from outside, on occasion, comes the impetus, the inducement, the call and that all any of us can do is say yes to it whether we answer the call in ministry or as laity.

Artists - musicians - writers know about it. Human creativity is perhaps best described as an artist becoming a vehicle of the art which transcends his or her own being. Roman Catholic author Graham Greene has a fine sense of it. In his novel, The Power and the Glory, an alcoholic failure of a priest is the medium through which God's grace takes shape and becomes active. And Madeleine L'Engle writes:

> "Look at them! ordinary human beings, full of flaws, sins, humanness, but found by God...God always calls unqualified people. In cold reality no one is qualified..."

And then she tries for an answer to the puzzle in a way I found intriguing:

> "If God had chosen great kings, successful and wealthy merchants, wise men with their knowledge of the stars, it would be easy to think that these people, of their own virtue and understanding, accomplished on their own the blessing which God asked them to complete." (The Irrational Season, p. 100)

Does it mean that only the mediocre get in the kingdom? Or that if you are not poor, nondescript, and without influence God isn't interested in you? Of course not. It means that what God chooses you for is probably not what you would choose you for. It means that discovery all of us more-or-less make, namely, that God has chosen us and called us and it has had nothing to do with any deserving on our part. It means that he sometimes chooses the small to carry the heaviest burden. It means that God chooses the successful banker sometimes to be gentle and compassionate, and the nurse to be tough. It means that in his infinite wisdom God chooses us to do what he knows we can do best and what, now and then, we can see we needed to do for our own wholeness and integrity.

That's the adventure of it, of course. It is why ordinary people become extraordinary saints in the Bible. It is the invitation and challenge of discipleship in every age. Your life has a purpose. You may not always see it clearly. But the testimony of God's people is there is purpose for each of us, a reason to be, tasks which God needs us to do. God has chosen you. In Jesus Christ he has called you. The adventure begins when you say "yes". AMEN.

Ernest Campbell comments: "From the beginning the church has been made up of the non-descript. Even the Apostle Paul was forced to recognize that 'not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble are called': Ordinary people showing extraordinary commitment are the strength of our congregations. (Campbell's Notebook, Volume III, No. 1)

One of the perplexities of the Biblical story has to do with the qualifications of the people God always seems to have work for him. If not dull, in contemporary terms, they are quintessentially human. They are ordinary people. Thy mystery of election is how theology would describe it. How in the world did God end up choosing Israel of all nations? Why not a strong, well organized culture? Why not Egypt, Rome, or Greece? Or, as Old Testament scholars love to put it: "How odd of God to choose the Jews."

When you begin to ask the question from inside the Bible the incongruities multiply. Frederick Buechner calls the characters in the Bible "...this rag-bag of people..." Think of their almost embarrassing humanity and the fact that among all the things we believe about them the clearest and simplest is that in spite of the flaws God chose them for a particular purpose.

After all, Adam disobeys at the first opportunity, blames Eve and Eve blames the snake. Cain kills Abel; Lot's daughters give him too much wine and sleep with him; Noah gets publically drunk; Abraham gives his wife to Abimelich to save his own skin. Jacob deceives his elderly father and defrauds his brother; Moses is a murderer who can't speak very well in public; and their kings, later, are known more for their mediocrity and opportunism than for anything else except David. And David lusts, covets, schemes, commits adultery, then lies and murders to cover his tracks. David, someone said, could not have passed a simple test in morality.

Obviously there is something going on here which is different from the way we might evaluate, choose, and employ people to work for us. Obviously, being a celebrity doesn't count for much, nor does having all the personal characteristics to match the position description, nor does moral punity seem to put God off when he's making choices. St. Paul, it has been pointed out many times, would never make the first cut with a reasonable pulpit committee.

And then, behind these observations, there is a deeper assertion the Bible makes on several occasions. It is that God not only chooses ordinary human beings who are sometimes quite dull, are always terribly flawed, he also chooses some people who either do not care about him, oppose him, or deny that he exists. That is an idea which sounds acceptable enough until one begins to think about it a bit.

It is ordinarily associated with Isaiah, the prophet whose call to his vocation and his resounding "Here am I, send me." we read this morning. Isaiah heard the call of God and responded, strongly and immediately. His qualifications are not an issue. But later, this same Isaiah is found making a staggering assertion. It is in the tenth chapter...

> "Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury;
> against a Godless nation I send him..."

Soren Kierkegaard remarked somewhere that while Jesus turned water into wine, his church seems determined to turn the wine back into water.

The second reality to which the sign of Cana points, I believe, is the consistent goodness of the creation and the consistency of the Gospel with the good gifts of life in all its dimensions.

The third reality to which Cana points is, quite simply, Jesus himself. As the scholar Raymond Brown taught us earlier, "The purpose of the sign...is revelation about the person of Jesus...that shines through is his glory, and the only reaction that is emphasized is the belief of the disciples. (Anchor Bible, p. 103)"

The sign of Cana is Jesus himself, getting involved in a mundane human situation, helping along a wedding celebration about to end prematurely for lack of refreshments. Compared to that - compared to the assertion that Almighty God gets himself involved in that part of thing, the mere changing of water to wine palms in drama. The Incarnation is and always has been the real miracle. The person of Jesus - the Christ - is the staggering assertion here. The Holy God come among us in the flesh in the life of one who cares about things like a wedding celebration, and the birth of a child, and the graduation of a son, and the death of grandparents, the God who cares so deeply about the day to day living of the people he has created that he gets into life with them. Incarnation. Jesus the Christ. The Miracle.

The conversion: the change at the heart of Christianity is not simply moral improvement, although that is the result. It is not the change to be more liberal politically, or more conservative: it is not to change life styles, although that will surely happen. The conversion is to Jesus Christ. The invitation is to accept his lordship: to live in relation to him, in obedience to his will.

I need the weekly reminder in worship, near the beginning, when we are told: "In Christ we become new people altogether." The Good News is that in Christ we are accepted and forgives by God, the past is finished and gone. But, for my money, the best news of all comes next: "In Christ, everything has become fresh and glorious new."

And so, may we sing it once more:

"Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns!
Let men and women their songs employ.
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy."

Whatever the reason, the wine was gone, and we may deduce that the groom was furious, his mother tragic, his father nonplussed, his in-laws, in-laws. Many apparently came, then left enough to feel part of that pain because only good friends can.

She called the distraught attention to Jesus' attention and he made a strange request. Near the entrance to the house stood six large stone jars. They were part of the Jewish purification of all houses. Their function was to hold the water for the various rites of purification prescribed in a Jewish household. Several times a day, including meal time, the servants washed their hands. When guests arrived, they used a bitter-herb dipper in the jars to wash. The jars, by the way, each held twenty-to thirty gallons.

Jesus told them to fill these jars with water which the servants did, though one can't help but imagine that they were thinking contemptuously about their curious assignment. The professionals, of course, knew what had happened. When he tasted the contents of the jars he discovered, good stuff, no good. In fact, that he chided his servant for not serving the good wine first.

The obvious inference is that after several days of plenty, he realizes the difference in the quality of wine suddenly changes, and so the party continues now with Jesus and friends in attendance, knowing that 120 gallons of good wine to keep it going.

What does it mean? It helps, first, to note that the author calls what happened a sign. The fact that changing water into wine is impossible, or at least impossible in fact on the basis of anyone's understanding of chemistry, seems not to concern him at all. The author, commentarily, simply assumes, and points out, mentions the miracle almost as an aside. The physical nature of the contents of the jar is not the astounding thing here therefore: the power and grace of Jesus is.

Signs, of course, point elsewhere. It is the essence of a sign not to call attention to itself but to direct it elsewhere. Here is a sound in which a sign which receives too much attention actually begins to frustrate its purpose, as anyone has discovered, for instance, who is at busy traffic, computing, and computing the information that comes at one by the sights at the confluence of routes 115, 670, and 31 thoroughfares at Keystone rather than from street signs.

We would like to know how it is that Mr. becomes Shelly, and that Peter, scientific curmudgeon, becomes extremely, exceptionally, because the author apparently neither knows nor much cares. The text will not satisfy us where and one of the reasons is that doesn't and the questions the text puts to us better life through long secularity but to this extraordinary sign in a sign pointing to Jesus.

It points, I believe, to the fact that people get changed in contact with Jesus. I began by suggesting that Christian people should remember that this is so. It is part of our business, I suggested, not to want to change, to assume, rather, that though others may need to expand their horizons, change, repent, the status quo in our lives is quantitatively satisfactory. Why it is liberal Protestantism, assuming nuclear, has lost its taste of conversion to the fundamentalists. In fact the soul-searching, continual renewal concerns

Then a man was born, one of their number, a citizen of a King who lived and died and strangely lived again in the experience of his friends. And his friends read again the ancient stories of God's dealings with their ancestors, but this time they interpreted what they read in light of what they had seen of God's purpose in Jesus - in his living and dying and living again. And then it began to make sense - not just for Jews like themselves, but for anyone who had eyes to see or ears to hear. With this encouragement they too began to write of the mighty acts of God that they had seen in Christ.

And once again because of the confidence that is rooted in hope, those writers would matter-of-factly record how they and others had doubted, stumbled, fumbled, and generally been ordinary human beings, because God had been able to use them as much as in spite of themselves as not. So the disciples Andrew and James could fight over who was going to get a cabinet position, and Peter could deny ever knowing Jesus. And Paul, for whom scripture was what we would call the Old Testament, would laugh to think that his impassioned scribblings would someday be venerated as scripture.

And that gives us a clue that God is continuing to tell stories. For the Great Story Teller will be as dynamic and alive as the stories. To ignore by criticism or irrevelancy the biblical story is to make of society, or America, an idol. To make the Bible a cookbook guide to finance, marital relations, astronomy or macrobiology is to make of it an idol. And as the story of God on it. Sinai says, God will have no idols as competition.

The telling and retelling of these stories for centuries has brought life and hope to millions. And this hope comes and is felt because that story becomes their story and yours and mine.

Now does it happen that that long ago and far away story becomes here and now? There you are reading the thing (and you've got to read it - sensitively, objectively, critically even) when suddenly it grabs you and the story jumps out of the book and into your life. For me, it's like those pictures that children and psychologist love where one minute you're looking at a goblet and the next without warning, it becomes two faces. The next moment it's a goblet. As you read the bible, the Bible reads you. John Calvin called this reading the Bible with "the spectacles of faith." The Presbyterian Confession of 1967 calls it the "illumination of the holy spirit." All trying to describe the continuing mystery of God's presence in these living words.

So Paul wrote to a church 1925 years ago, and it is our church. And his words to them are words to us if we would lay claim to be Christian in this new year, with a new building - with new programs.

And these are the marks of that church. "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. With greater strength comes greater responsibility. "For whatever was written in former days was written for instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

"May the God of these scriptures, the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant to you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus." The harmony of the rich interplay of different voices singing different melodies, doing different works, finding different emphasis is what makes this church and this life to stimulating. "That together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is our story. That is our hope. Amen.

The Christian story has hope because it is a story. There is a beginning. There is drama and plot. And there will be an end. It doesn't necessarily mean that things will get better. It means that God is in control - past, present and future. The surety of knowing how things will end and the surety of knowing who created and began all things gives us an incredible reservoir of strength and assurance and encouragement. That is Christian hope. It's like playing basketball with a team that you know will win. Knowing that, you can loosen up, play better, be a better team member and enjoy the game. Hope, not optimism, is a hallmark of the Christian faith.

This hope prompts our actions and causes us to care about and share with one another. But it's more than caring about others. Our role as Christians has got to be seen as something more than a voluntary social welfare organization helping others or doing good. We are and we must be that, of course, but without the underpinnings of the Christian story then those actions of the church are no different than those of government agencies.

But isn't it the good that counts? Who cares why it's done? T. S. Elliot in the play "Murder in the Cathedral" has Sir Thomas Becket say that the "greatest treason is to do the right deed for the wrong reason. Governments change, policies and people change, what society views as proper changes. The strength of the Christian faith is that it has continued to inform, interpret and judge what society does. To do that it has needed a standard, a reference. How will we continue to respond to and in and with society if we have forgotten the very basic tenets which make us distinctive, the very stories that orient us - and give us hope?

Whether we read the Bible or not, whether we believe it to be true and binding in all its parts or find it more or less irrelevant or incomprehensible we cannot escape its claim on us and still call ourselves Christians. To be a Christian is to belong to a community whose identity and vocation have been deeply and decisively shaped by the Bible." (Phyllis Bird, The Bible as the Churches Book)

We can't ignore the Bible or avoid it so we might as well join it and make its crazy quilt of stories ours. This whole library of books has a story. It's the story of a people who discovered, with a strange mixture of exaltation and terror, that they had been possessed by God - that God had taken them over and was using them for some tremendous purpose. They were never quite sure what the purpose was. So they waited for centuries for their promised Messiah who could make it all clear. In the meantime, they wrote and rewrote the stories of the great things God had all ready done for them.

And since it was God who was doing it, who was using the people for God's own purpose, there was little need to whitewash the stories. The major players are presented in all their humanness. The TV soaps like Dallas and Dynasty have plots which water down the scandals of David and Bathsheba or of Abraham and Sarah. Jacob the Cheat seems to almost systematically break all the commandments and yet it is this character whom God chooses to carry on the faith. Hope is realizing the great things God has done and looking forward to the great things yet to come. And even when they had little else the Hebrews had hope.

education was founded so that every citizen could read it. During his campaign President Reagan pointed to a Bible and said, "all the complex and horrendous questions concerning us at home and world wide are answered in that one book."

Newsweek reports that "historians are discovering that the Bible, perhaps even more than the Constitution, is our founding document." (12/27/82)

The way we construct reality, the basic beliefs we have about life are based on ideas and concepts we received which have been confirmed by our life experiences. By poems or tales, paintings, or songs or other people's lives we have heard or overheard stories which give our life orientation.

By the time children today reach the age of reason they have absorbed over 30,000 electronic stories by way of television. Stories which provide our cultural mythology - what it means to be alive today - how the world turns, - and what these stories tell is that the world turns fast and easily. Answers, resolutions of problems, and stardom come fast. Products make life easier. Even the most complex dilemmas will be resolved in a one hour show. We are giving the future generation massive doses of optimism - and no hope. We are not providing them with stories which will deepen the level at which they live life.

"The Little Engine that Could" is a famous American child's story - and it vividly shows the difference between optimism and hope. It is also one of the primary stories we have as a nation told to explain our individual, corporate and national success. The little engine wants to be like the larger engines and go over the mountain with its load of cars. As it strains up the mountain it puffs "I think I can, I think I can", and it does. That's optimism and we as a nation heard that story and bought it. It's the power of positive thinking school. So what happens when that engine, now middle-aged and a railroad executive, gets side-tracked/encouraged to leave/laid off? Did he fail to think he could? Did he engineer the recession? Can he not optimistic enough? And if our country or our steel or our cars are no longer the flagship of the world rails, is it because we didn't try harder? Luckily there are other stories.

The Bible gives us stories which give us hope. The Christian faith is sometimes unthinkingly called optimistic. A faith whose symbol is an ancient form of torture and whose watchword is "Take up your cross and follow me" and whose God becomes human to endure evil and pain with us cannot be called optimistic.

There is a pseudo-Christian heresy of optimism found which says - Find Jesus and things will get better and better. Unfortunately this heresy gets the most media time. The electronic commercialization and trivialization of the faith often replaces hard hope with easy optimism.

LIBRARY OF HOME
Romans 15:1-6
January 9, 1993

Ashley J. Beavers
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

In the future, historians might describe our culture by the covers of our news magazines. They preserve images of what we deem important and noteworthy. I was struck by a recent Newsweek cover because it looked so out of step with the times. It was the Bible printed to look like an illuminated manuscript. In the cover stories of current significance it was a throwback out of the past. There is a strange vitality about that ancient document that compels people to look at it in the present.

Ane while it continues to be newsworthy in the battles for its place in the school and in the laboratory and it's produced and translated and stolen in record numbers, many of us feel its strangeness more than its vitality.

Even the most skeptical has probably had a resolution to find out what all the fuss was about and to "read the Bible". And after a book or two they become (as the preface to the Reader's Digest Condensed Version says) "confused and exhausted". I have confidence that this same scenario will occur in this new year, despite the fact that Congress had designated 1993 as the Year of the Bible. The Bible does have a strange vitality and we can tap that and make it our own.

One of the most powerful ways that the Bible can come alive for us whether we be skeptic or saint or a bit of both is through its stories. The Bible gives us stories to help us live life fully. Parents grieve because their children don't know who Moses was. English teachers are saddened by students who can't savor the richness of Moby Dick because the name Ishmael is foreign to them. Play-goers to the current Broadway musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" miss the continuity of the play because they are not familiar with the story. But it's more than just a literary classic which adds spice to our civilization. The stories of the Bible have the ability to shape our lives.

Psychologists, educators and theologians are recovering the power and impact of stories on our lives. Stories, myths, tales all seem to feel our deep need to understand and to make sense of things. Every family has favorite stories which get recounted every Christmas or family gathering about what it means to be a member of that family. Children learn not to cry "wolf" because of the story about the shepherd boy who did. Children are particularly enchanted with stories about their parents as children. These stories help them see what life is and will be like.

Corporations and businesses have their own stories. Terrence Deal, author of the recent book, Corporate Cultures, ties the success of corporations with their own stories and heroes that in the telling pass on the dreams and visions of the company.

Nations too, are shaped by stories. America has had a particular love affair with the Bible. The Puritans, the immigrants, and every Presidential candidate have seen in the Biblical story the special destiny of our country. Settlers named cities after Biblical names, called our nation the "New Israel" and justified social and political actions because of that Book. Public

One of my favorite quotes is from a speech a professor made once at a library dedication. Instead of the normal accounts of one objects on that occasion, he decided to tell students and faculty what he had learned through the recent death of his wife...it had to do with time. Citing an Emily Dickinson poem that goes:

"By a departing light
We see nearer, quite,
Than by a wick that stays
There's something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the ways."

He commented, "It's a sense of the ending that makes the beginning and all that follows therefore, so much more meaningful." He gave wise advice about the time to live. "Love them while you can," he said, "and never, never be embarrassed...look at things not only as if you were seeing them for the first time, but as if you were seeing them for the last time, and had to take them all in and remember them forever..."

I suppose next to our basic concept of time, our greatest error, in this context, is the assumption that present time is simply preparation for the future: that hope, success, joy, meaning will happen someday, but not now. We need, all of us, the lesson in time which teaches that this is the only life we are going to live. There will never be another January 2, 1981. Whatever significance this day is to have - will be experienced today...period...

I am suggesting that to know who the child is, is to believe in the possible, to embrace the power of God which makes all things new - even your life and mine. I am suggesting the simple discipline of surveying one's life and putting to an end what one doesn't want there, and resolving to begin what one hopes, strives for and wants for the future.

The birth of Jesus after all - is little more than harmless sentiment, until it begins to make a difference in the world. And it does that, not through some mysterious cosmic process, but as individual men and women know the love of God, and respond to it by resolving to live new lives. Peace in the world - reconciliation between two people - can't happen miraculously - but slowly, painfully, inexorably, as individuals begin to stop acting in old ways and begin to act in new ways.

With the wisdom of her years of waiting, old Anna saw in the infant Jesus the beginning of something brand new - for her people - for history - and for her personally. The waiting was ended. The future was beginning.

So today, one week after we celebrated the birth, we observe the passing of time. I am suggesting that, by God's grace, it may be a time of ending and beginning for us as well. As Simeon and Anna saw the end of the old and the beginning of the new, so let us come to table - to celebrate the miracle of incarnation, the mysterious presence of God - but also to renew our faith, our trust, our love, our obedience. AMEN.

Life can be renewed: people can change; the old can be put to rest and the new brought to life. "Leaven" join the pagans shouted to his startled countrymen. That is, 'start anew - become new people.'

Unfortunately, however, our sensitivity to time is confined to the lesson that there isn't enough of it. Michael Cooper speaks for most of us in this prayer:

> "Lord, you must have made a mistake in your calculations.
> There is a big minute somewhere
> The hours are too short,
> The days are too short,
> Our lives are too short." (Prayers, p. 58)

It seems that our greatest unhappiness, and our most frequent lament has to do with the scarcity of time. For middle class America, the common lament about her terribly busy one is has almost become a form of social greeting, or a boasting of one's social importance. Every time, it seems, or, if not immoral, at least impolite. The truth about most of us most of the time, is that we are stressed, burdened, and unhappy because there are not enough hours in do what we want with any remnant left over for doing what we must do.

We march to the tick of the clock - the calendar appointment, the scheduled deadline. It is, in measure a peculiar but good thing about us. Our prompt-ness and time --- connotionally have made us a very productive people. It does not take many days living in another culture to discover one of the major reasons for American efficiency: namely, the high value we place on time and its use. Labor saving devices save time as well. A machine which does the work of 20 people, frees their time to invest elsewhere. And yet, as Marshall McLuhan reminded us several years ago, every technological advance is accompanied by a loss of something.

What we have lost, I believe, is what could only be called a philosophic sense that we have enough time to do what we ought to be doing. We have the capacity to end some things and to begin new ones. Unfortunately it takes a tragedy or near tragedy sometimes to learn the lesson. The intrinsic value of the time we have is sometimes apparent only after we have lost a great deal of it. Isn't that what really is behind the wish that we were young again? We have now two precious that time was.

Jan Kem is a theologian philosopher who went through a chaotic mid-life crisis in the 70's, leaving church, profession, marriage, and family behind, in order to participate in the new revolutionary experiences of our culture. He has written a remarkable book about it in which he confesses: "By infidelity I learned that vows may be every bonds that tie us to the earth. Through exile I learned that I cannot live without a home." (p. 89) And then: "So long as we evade the fear of coming to an end we never begin or begin again." (p. 40)

The coming of Jesus Christ means that there are always new possibilities in time. There is, that is to say, hope. We are not predetermined to die in a nuclear holocaust. Nor personally, are we predetermined to keep repeating old habits, old customs which are destructive, hurtful, unhappy. We can change - begin again.

John L. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS
Luke 2:22- 38-40
January 2, 1983

The December 13 issue of Time reported that Malcolm Muggeridge, at the age of 79, had publically confessed his faith and joined the church. For much of this century, Time reported, Muggeridge has been the "great cadly of British letters, unleashing his rapier prose on much that civilization has held dear, including organized religion." A decade or so ago Muggeridge began to see Christianity in a new light while working on a BBC documentary, focusing on Mother Teresa of Calcutta and her work with the poor. Muggeridge was profoundly impressed with the selflessness. In the interim he thought, prayed, wrote a marvelous book on the life of Jesus. And now, he was ready to make his personal commitment. And so, in a small Roman Catholic parish church Muggeridge and his wife declared their faith. His reflections on the occasion I found, as always, provocative and well put.

He had, he said, "a sense of homecoming, a picking up the threads of a lost life, of responding to a bell that has long been ringing, of finding a place at a table that has long been left vacant." Afterward, "Muggeridge stepped out into the brisk English autumn air, and for once seemed content with all he surveyed. 'It's a particularly joyful sort of day' said he, 'It's rather like when you fall in love with a woman and ask her to marry you. You know there are no more questions to be asked.'" (Time, 12/13/82, p. 63)

That delightful accounting reminded me of nothing so much as the incidents reported near the end of the second chapter of Luke. Mary and Joseph had brought their infant to the Temple for the rite of purification. While there they encountered two elderly people. One, named Simeon, Luke reports, took the baby in his arms. Like a loving grandfather, and said words which have become, over the centuries, the beloved Nunc Dimittis, 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.'

The other person was Anna: eighty-four years old, a widow, a prophetess, who spent most of her time in the temple, praying. She saw the baby and she too gave thanks to God. Both appear in Luke as representatives of a people who have been waiting. Both, with the wisdom of the years, recognize the significance of Jesus. Neither of them, by the way, appear again in the biblical narrative. Both, like Malcolm Muggeridge, indicate that what they have seen has blessed them with an illusive sense of completeness. "Now I can die in peace," Simeon said. "There are no more questions to be asked," Muggeridge echoed.

There is no liturgical significance I know of for the occurrence of Christmas and the New Year one week from each other, unless it is this: having seen the Christ child, aged Simeon and Anna knew that their own time now had a sense of completeness about it. To see Jesus is to know that something is ending and something new is beginning.

That motif is common in the Biblical narrative: unlike Eastern philosophies, history is not cyclical in the Bible, predestined to repeat itself over and over in a monotonous continuum. Biblical history has a beginning and an end, a goal, a purpose. And with the grand sweep of things, individual histories are comprises of a series of endings and beginnings.

One of my favorite quotes is from a speech a professor made once at a library dedication. Instead of the normal academic fare one expects on that occasion, he decided to tell students and faculty what he had learned through the recent death of his wife...it was to be his wife's time. Citing an Emily Dickinson poem that goes:

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I suppose next to our static concept of time, our greatest error, in this context, is the assumption that present time is simply preparation for the future: that hope, success, joy, meaning will happen someday, but not now. We need, all of us, the lesson in time which teaches that this is the only life we are going to live. There will never be another January 2, 1987. Whatever significance this day is to have - will be experienced today...period...

I am suggesting that to know who the child is, is to believe in the possible, to embrace the power of God which makes all things new - even your life and mine. I am suggesting the simple discipline of surveying one's life and putting to an end what one doesn't want there, and resolving to begin what one hopes, strives for and wants for the future.

The birth of Jesus after all - is little more than heavenly sentiment, until it begins to make a difference in the world. And it does that, not through some supernatural cosmic process, but as individual men and women know the love of God, and respond to it by resolving to live new lives. Hence the world - reconciliation between God and people - won't happen miraculously - but slowly, painfully, laboriously, as individuals begin to stop acting in old ways and begin to act in new ways.

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Life can be renewed; people can change; the old can be put to rest and the new brought to life. "Repent" John the baptist shouted to his startled countrymen; that is, "start anew - become new people."

Ordinarily, however, our sensitivity to time is confined to the lament that there isn't enough of it. Hopkins Quoist speaks for most of us in this prayer:

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Sam Keen is a theologian philosopher who went through a classic mid-life crisis in the 70's, leaving church, profession, marriage, and family behind, in order to participate in the new revolutionary experiences of our culture. He has written a remarkable book about it in which he confesses: "By infidelity I learned that vows may be sweet words that tie us to the earth. Through exile I learned that I cannot live without a home. (p. 37) And then: "So long as we evade the fear of coming to an end we never begin or begin again. (p. 40)

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ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS
Luke 2:22, 36-40
January 2, 1983

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

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